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SQUATTERS' RIGHTS

by



RITA DONOVAN

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
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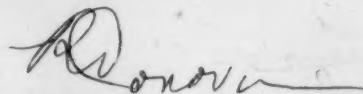
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submitted by RITA DONOVAN
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

To uncover the history of a people, one must study all available information. The historian, the archaeologist, the geologist - all study specific aspects of a culture. Individually, each has an incomplete vision; but with their tools and knowledge they collectively attempt to piece together a remote and alien "puzzle."

Frederick Aurelie is such a man. An archaeologist, he has spent his life studying the lost Mayan culture. And then, Frederick, too, is dead.

His son Alexander appears at the funeral. Frederick Aurelie, Alexander realizes, is now also part of "history", and this recent history is no easier to decipher than the Mayan puzzle his father had grappled with. Alexander must sift through his father's journals, his own memories, to piece together a history of Frederick Aurelie. In so doing he must relinquish his temporal framework, loosen the bindings between the tenses, just as his father had tried to do.

Lawrence Durrell speaks of this in The Alexandria Quartet, when his protagonist reveals that he is learning "to inhabit those deserted spaces which time misses - beginning to live between the ticks of the clock, so to speak."

Heinrich Böll does not relinquish the temporal framework totally, but speaks of this same desire in his essay "Missing Persons", when he says that he wants "not what is told, not even what is true, and certainly not what is eternal. I want the present of those who belong to the past. To get on and off wherever I like."

Durrell speaks of the "adventive moment which can't be measured", Böll of the living, breathing present of the past.

Frederick Aurelie discovers that historians, archaeologists, must solve this piece of the puzzle, must go beyond science, beyond even time, to gain an understanding. Alexander Aurelie just wants to learn something about his father. He must do the same.

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Each moment is not only the presence of one god but the sum total of many presences. The deities of the numbers, those of the days, months, and other time measurements, come together in different points of arrival throughout the cycles. The resultant of their forces colors reality with multiple tints. Such was the universe in which the Maya lived and thought.

-Miguel León-Portilla,
Time and Reality in
the Thought of the Maya

So the other day this bum comes up to me, see, says
he hasn't had a bite all day...so I bit him.

-Vaudeville

I Vaudeville

Rubber tires screeching over the topography of this life, he thought, and the new ones don't even have inner tubes. Just like this century, go from an imperfect interior to the perfected hollow space, the product coming complete with standard exterior periphery. Not to mention Wimpdom Symptoms.

He stared out the face-sized window overlooking the wing. The wing itself offered a measure of stability and solidity, a round decal on the cowl proclaiming: "Pratt and Whitney Aircraft - Dependable Engines", but this was life according to seat nine and Alexander was pondering the emergency exit window at seat five.

His wariness had begun when he was a child and his mother informed him that the sky was God's home. At the time the idea struck him as something quite beautiful, the deity floating in a sky of endless blue with clouds like bleached versions of the puffballs he sometimes found on the mountain. It had taken him an extra twenty-five years to discover the existence of the true inhabitants. He was in their territory now and could feel their painted faces turning toward him, not yet identifying, but watching. The nose of one flashing on and off pensively, another removing shards of a candy-based pop bottle from the tufts of his green ruffled collar. The Deranged Vaudevillians. The Vaudeville Gods. He knew They were nodding; They found him again.

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Alexander drew a cloud on the tip of the wing. As his finger traced it a cloud actually appeared. For a moment it reminded him of a hollow puffball, then it was mist, then nothing. These large planes he thought, so lazy an attempt, so numbing. He remembered the galvanized steel grin on the plane's beak. Sure, let them believe they're going somewhere, as the plane bares its teeth and the Vaudevillians snort, guffaws heard from planet to planet. They held you up but could just as easily flap you in the wind like a paper, flick you over like a bug. They could just as easily destroy this plane. They wouldn't though, Alexander knew Them. He'd stopped at the airport vending machine in Edmonton and bought flight insurance. He'd quit his job before flying out. And They never take you down when you're prepared.

Alexander felt momentarily uneasy and scuffed his feet, a jittery attempt to feel composed. Another Wimpdom Symptom in a man of thirty-five who had long thought he'd given up quivering like a child in favour of quivering like a man. He had no desire to make a scene yet he distorted his facial features and Boris Karloffed from the corner of his mouth, "Screwed up at thirty-thousand feet."

She was watching him again, the woman in 8D. Since they boarded in Edmonton she'd been sitting rigidly with her True Confessions magazine and her rosary beads. She took turns reciting the prayers and mumbling details from the book. The magazine promised to reveal the secrets to "Why I Married the Man Who Raped

Me." 8D had already consumed this confidence and was no doubt eager to devour more. He could hear her flipping the pages and juggling the beads. Just his luck, an airborne evangelist. Alexander focussed on the wing but the clicking sound came closer. Alfie would have been proud of the way 8D swung the beads in front of his nose like cheap rhinestones, tempting him with salvation.

"Is someone sitting here?" she motioned to the seat beside Alexander.

He concentrated on the empty chair.

"Here," she repeated. She was about five feet tall in slippers and rosary beads; her eyeshadow was green. "I'm a little nervous about flying. Do you mind if I sit with you?"

When she sat down her double-knit thighs locked together and altered the plane's weight distribution. The aircraft dropped through the clouds and snapped back to thirty thousand feet like a yo-yo. Alexander clutched the arm of the chair.

"My God," the woman concluded in terror.

"Air pocket," Alexander gritted his teeth.

The engines hummed like a barber-shop quartet. Alexander could see Them in the belly of the plane, striped jackets, flat-topped hats, white ducks, a cumulonimbus choir humming "Heart of My Heart". Father's plane would not have hummed, it was smaller and louder, but then father had had more class. A twin-engined flier with his soul in a flight-bag.

The attendant approached, amending turbulence with juices.

Thick, opaque tomato liquid made its way slowly and reluctantly into 8D's plastic cup. This was the airline's advertised "comfort" and it didn't comfort Alexander. He shook his head at the attendant. She bothered him; she was anatomically perfect and were they about to crash would undoubtedly be applying hair spray and blush so the corpse would look "untimely". Perfect people were like that.

Ruth used to be able to walk into a room and tell you exactly what was wrong with it, objectively, critically, and often accurately. She figured she could do the same with peoples' lives. He admitted she knew a lot about decor, but was never convinced she knew a damned thing about interior decorating.

"Where are you going?" 8D was asking, her juice glass empty.

Alexander played with his safety belt. "To a funeral."

The tomato colour drained from the woman's face, but she ventured to make consolatory noises. Her "True Confessions" instinct bristling, she added, "Was it someone close?"

"No."

She relaxed, although a little disappointed. "Well, I guess it's not so bad. Still, they're always painful, aren't they?"

"I guess so, for the corpse."

"I beg your pardon?" she fidgetted with the beads, the decades crashing against one another. She was getting ready to save him. Alexander stared, then ripped the rosary from her

fingers and tried to lasso the empty juice glass with it.

"I beg your pardon!" 8D's hands scurried after her beads, clutching the crucifix.

Alexander shrugged and dropped them in her lap. He looked at her and in his best "Long Way to Tipperary" voice sang:

It's a long day for the cadaver
It's a long day on show,
It's a long day for the cadaver
Who would rather decompose...

The woman's eyes bulged and her mouth squashed to center to say 'Well', but froze on the 'W':

Goodbye nose and earlobes
Farewell skin so fair,
It's a long, long day for the cadaver
But his heart's right there...

Alexander could hear the Vaudeville barber-shop quartet joining in through the drone of the engines. He smiled serenely and shrugged again. "I used to have a job delivering singing telegrams," he explained.

"Perhaps," the woman gasped, "but I honestly think that when one is referring to a funeral, anybody's funeral..."

"My father's."

Her eyes went convex. "What?"

Alexander pulled out the newspaper clipping and held it open for her:

VILLAHERMOSA, Tabasco:

Dr. Frederick Aurelie, noted Canadian archaeologist, was found dead September 5 after the crash of his light plane near the Chiapas mountain region of the Yucatan peninsula. The pilot and field associate, Edward Simmons, is in serious condition in a Montreal hospital following emergency surgery in Mexico City.

Reports indicate no mechanical malfunction, and investigation suggests the possibility of pilot error or weather interference. Dr. Aurelie was to return to Montreal and then embark on a lecture tour of Canada and the United States. He is survived by his three children.

"My father," he repeated. After Alfreda's call he had scanned the Edmonton papers for information. Unsuccessful, he had gone down to the cigar store and found the item in the Montreal Gazette. He hadn't seen his father in three years. Three years without the gritty glares. Alexander rubbed his closed eyes, pressing them into his skull. Plenty of room for them in there; definitely the century for perfected hollows.

8D was shrinking from him toward the safety of her name-seat, blinking in horror as he airlessly whistled. Alexander increased the volume slightly, so that "Long Way to Tipperary" was barely yet clearly audible, and watched as she nervously marched away. A real trooper.

He shifted impatiently in his seat as the plane began its landing descent. He knew there was a determined expression on the plane's beak, the landing lights on the wings flashing messages to Vaudeville. Along the runway, the jet was preparing to land in its own spotlight, turning the beam on itself. It didn't matter if it was too bright outside to see it, it was on you all the same.

The seat belt sign flickered and went out, as did the smile on the steward at the entrance to First Class. Alexander retrieved his small tote bag from the overhead compartment. He never travelled with anything more when he went home, he never

intended to stay. The bag was light, containing shaving equipment and clean underwear, as he was already wearing the funeral-suit. His only presentable set of clothing, he felt obliged to resurrect it from the trunk that doubled as a night table in his Edmonton apartment. Travel light, his father always said. Vaudeville grinned, training the beam. Light travel.

The stewardess stood at the end of the aisle, yawning demurely and removing a particle of polite dust from her left eye. She stared with her other eye at Alexander, no doubt taking note of the lean, taut body, the clear-boned face and stern countenance. She probably wondered whether he was married, whether he would like to press her up against the dumb-waiter, caress her bony body with the caramelled pears. He shook his head. She probably recognized the suit from the trip west three years ago. Still, he admitted he looked good in it. A good suit hides a lot of flaws, he'd always heard, but somehow the idea of a lot of flaws did not sit too well today. "Yes, Alexander Aurelie knocks 'em dead at funerals," he Karloffed. Keep his father company. And here he was, underwear intact, five o'clock shadow at four-thirty p.m. and a mild case of nausea.

Alexander left the taxi to its own devices at the corner. The driver had had a fetish about perfumed aerosol sprays, fumigating the upholstery with pungent "Lilac Bouquet". Smell of odorous dates and pillow-boxes. Alexander felt no need to be

reminded of overpowering floral scents, there would be too much of that soon enough.

His feet scuffed along the leaf-lined sidewalk. He was grateful for this sound because noise was sometimes a defense against Them. The Vaudeville Gods understood silences and perverted them. Silence before the pie in the face, silence as the helium balloons float into the stratosphere or the man steps on the moon. Silence before the stumble on the carpet. They would infiltrate the sickroom, the bedroom, pervert intimate, painful, exquisite moments. They would do that, if you let Them. They hear you shaking your head, but They would do that.

He continued up the avenue. He wondered if the sidewalk recognized his footsteps; no, his feet knew, it was a different sidewalk. But the houses. Grey stone and sienna brick, they stood through time like monuments to his childhood. He was approaching one house he had particularly loved. As a boy, long before he had learned the word 'ostentatious', he had worshipped the great stone lions that sat sphinxlike on posts at the end of the driveway. This was where his best friend Alan had lived. They would mount the large cold beasts and ride fearlessly through terrifying landscapes. Alexander paused and rested his hand on the mane of the first lion. Alan. Alan who had become a marine biologist, married, and spent two-thirds of every year travelling. Alan who had once told him that the secret to being happy was never to let them know you were unhappy. That night three years ago when they both happened to find themselves in Montreal. How

they had gotten drunk at a St. Denis tavern and come back to this house, to these posts, and sprawled languidly across the lions. They had begun the evening by celebrating the publication of Alexander's then recent book, Stalagmite Statues. By the end of the night, atop the grainy lions, Alan had confessed bafflement at his own infidelity to his wife Julianne, and Alexander had disinterred the remains of his relationship with Ruth; and betrayed knowledge of the Vaudeville Gods.

He had not seen Alan since. Rumors of an extended research grant, rumors of a divorce. Alexander waded through the leaves, the reds, the ochres whirling around his feet.

The boy is chilly as the sun begins to slide behind the mountain. But he wipes his nose in the sleeve of his jacket and calls hoarsely to the other boy. "Get more over there!" The boy he yells at is wearing a cowboy hat and sitting on top of a large stone animal, a lion beast with a grey body and grey eyes. "Ah, I got to do it all myself?" The boy tramples the leaves, kicking and scraping them into a large heap. He works hard, dirt jamming under his fingernails, his runny nose sniffing intently. Once he is standing beside a huge pile he looks up at his friend and climbs onto the other lion. As the sky darkens around them, the two boys race frantically atop the animals, their bodies bouncing with the speed. And all at once, at the last speck of pink on the roof line of sky they leap off the lions and plunge into the leaves.

Since moving to Edmonton he had missed the red maples, the

black squirrels. The move had cost him, for it was to be the last attempt at reconciliation with Ruth. She left Edmonton a few months later and Alexander stayed, tired finally of leap-frogging across the continent at her whim. "At best, one is following a frog," he had said, as she adjusted the frame on the Duchamp print. The "Nude Descending a Staircase" tumbled to the floor as Ruth slammed the door behind her.

Vaudeville had liked her style. They were always looking for new talent, and auditioned constantly. They were watching him now, a tall lean man in a conservative dark grey suit, carrying a black leather tote bag, mouth pursed in silent whistling.

He stood before the olive-trimmed wooden door and rang the bell. How many times had he stood there, wondering whether to chance entering, to dare speeding past the half-open door of his father's study on his way to the sanctuary of the kitchen or his bedroom. And it was always the same, the door open just enough. Cringing adolescent flinging himself by, if he could only...

"Sandor, is that you?"

Oh, and the agony of having to face him. Comes the knotted half-voice, "Yes sir". Standing at the entrance to that musty room. Father behind the desk in the perpetual 'busy' position. Glasses balancing on the end of his nose now moved reluctantly to the top of his head. Volumes of yellowing books all around him. The shy smile that spreads stutteringly across his lips until it captures the unwilling face. The conversation will last no more

than a few moments, but how to fill those moments?

"Where have you been out so late, Sandor? You look cold."

The boy, shifting feet, his shadow repeating the gesture on the wall. Watching the bright study lamp to avoid looking at his father.

"Uh...oh, oh no sir. Not at all...a bunch of us were over at the park, that's all...nothing." Skidding hand along bookshelf. The man is...not turning the lamp down!

"Tell me about your history course this term," an almost cordial motioning toward the chair which the boy refuses to acknowledge.

"It's just a dumb old..." he sees his father's glance, "it's just fine sir." It's just an old Egyptian guy with squeaky shoes and a short fuse. "It's fine, sir. We...uh, use two books. One for Canada and one for the rest of the world."

"A whole one?" the man looks at the boy with exaggerated seriousness. "What subject are you most interested in, Sandor?"

Cathy Johnson's pointy blouse. "Uh, I don't know. Literature maybe, or math...but I think...history too. Maybe history as well."

The man looks pleased and the boy backs out of the room as the lamp is switched on.

The front door opened. His sister Alfreda stood in the haughty black uniform of mourning. Alfreda was a nun, though, so it didn't really count. She looked older than he remembered and he felt suddenly unaccountably embarrassed. She kissed his

cheek, wiping away non-existent lipstick, and ushered him into the house.

"I'm so pleased you've come, Alexander," she said, taking his bag from him. "It's so awful," she said, obliging the mood.

"Awful pleased," Alexander mimicked.

She was telling him that Horace had made all the funeral arrangements, that they were closing the casket tonight and, oh, would he like something to eat? Alexander shook his head, still suffering from the airline's styrofoam steak.

He sat in the yellow kitchen which was both familiar and alien to him. It was as though someone had entered his grey matter and pressed his memory center, the resulting image extraordinary in detail yet existing in the wrong tense. Alfreda was here, but she was this middle-aged shape, the stand-in for what had once been his pigtailed sister. Penumbra. A shadow surrounding a shadow. Only Alfreda was too pale a woman to carry it off, hence, the heavy black perimeter. "Outline the holy ones to make them stand out," he mumbled, "right?"

"Have you been working on anything lately?" she was bustling at the counter, locating the ground coffee, plugging in the kettle.

Alexander shrugged. "Oh, you know, I guess so...didn't know you cared. Never thought my stuff was particularly your style." He was referring to his three books, the two volumes of short stories, Centipede and Closet Humour, and the novel Stalagmite Statues. He was aware that Alfreda disapproved of

the books themselves, but admired the signature 'Aurelie', and the bond she mistook it signified. "I quit the telegram job," he added, tapping the table.

"Oh Alex, another job? I honestly don't know how you manage. You're thirty-five and haven't..."

"Haven't kept up my pension payments? I'm not in a sure thing like the God business, Alfie," he bit off the phrase, regretting the words.

Alfreda stiffened, but said nothing. Alexander watched his sister as she struggled to extract one and only one Melitta filter from the small box, making a clicking sound with her tongue. He had always intensely disliked this habit; it, like sighing, took too little effort. Evidence of a Wimpdom Symptom.

"Horace would have gone to get you, I asked him, but he was so tied up with the arrangements."

"I'm sure he did his best," Alexander answered unenthusiastically.

"Yes, the dear, he always does." She plunked the mug of coffee in front of Alexander. "It's so awful about father," she repeated.

Alexander stared at the outline of his sister. These Catholics. "Alfie, this is your big moment. All that Eternity stuff? You should be turning cartwheels!"

Perhaps it was the inappropriate choice of image. Sister Rosa Blanca gave Alexander the spearing look she had perfected in adolescence, and left the kitchen to grieve in private. He sang softly, "There's no business like woe business like no business

I know." She would be great at the funeral, old Alfie, Primadonna of the Hereafter.

He picked up his bag and his coffee and headed for the old room. His mother's samplers lined the wall diagonally all the way upstairs. He paused before a particular one and nodded. Mother had been fond of creating her own sayings, and had been very proud of the one that read, 'Another hour on the dial / Is it not better that we smile?' Alexander stood in front of it and smiled. There, mother.

His room had not been used since college. Drawings he had done as a child, faithfully tacked up by his mother, still decorated the walls. He looked closely at the one of "Alex and Eyetooth," a small boy and an enormous black labrador hound, frenzied crayon colours not contained within the boundaries of the two. He remembered the day he drew it. Sitting at the kitchen table beside his mother who was stirring cookie batter in a deep bowl. She was angry with him that morning because he'd dropped his crimson crayon into the mixture to make the cookies red, and she'd been forced to waste half the contents of the bowl. He worked quietly at his task, one eye watching his mother. When he had finished he sat back and surveyed his work. Even then he knew that the colouring was too wild, too uncontrolled. But his mother stood behind him and put her hands on his shoulders. She bent over him and kissed his forehead. "Now that's a nice picture," she said.

Alexander felt guilty as he stood in silent remembrance. It was, after all, his father's funeral. He backed away slowly, still looking at the drawing, and sat on the edge of the bed. The neatly turned down coverlet was evidence that a nun had been at work, dusting, polishing, and praying in the small room. For her heathen brother. Thank God for Horace. Father should have known he'd never be able to repeat a staunch, upright citizen like old Harry. Instead, Alfreda had been born, and then Sandor, the afterthought. Alexander touched the quilted bedspread. Well, at least she didn't sprinkle holy water everywhere.

He checked the kitchen for Alfreda and found a note saying she had gone to see about the flowers and would be back in time for the two of them to go to the funeral parlour together. He supposed he'd known it all along, how one day he'd come back here and stumble over the old footprints. There were many things which could well be forgotten, he knew, awkward things, times when he felt not sentimental and empathetic but decidedly mental and all too pathetic.

He walked around the house, amazed at the clutter that was still there. This place, where his father had lived alone. His father's projects had taken him all over the world, yet returning from a dig he never had grimy fingernails. His prints he left on foreign soil and he returned with a deep tan, a sore back, and more notes.

Sometimes the young Alexander would creep to the edge of the

hall landing in the night and lie near the stairs, listening to the sound the chair made when his father shifted his weight in the study below. Alexander's curled, cocoon body would shiver on the cold floor, but from that angle he could see out the hall window, watch the searchlight that crowned Mount Royal slowly circle the island. The buttery beam would lap up everything in its path, and sometimes Alexander let it find him and sometimes he just hid. And he would scratch his eight year old elbow and count, and the light would reappear. He had loved the bright beam, waited for it as a child. Only later had the searchlight been subverted, he catching glimpses of their rotting clothes and decaying smiles. The Vaudevillians.

The car pulled up to the grey stone building. The border of the driveway was fraying leaves, and Alexander noticed that this place made use of the same purple lighting he had seen at the airport. He thought about this for a moment and mouthed, "Nice touch."

Alfreda ignored Alexander's mutterings as she had since childhood. Alexander paid the driver and turned to his sister. "This is it, eh?" She nodded, holding the door handle. The floodlights were located somewhere behind a series of petrified plants. Grotesque shrubbery. In the twilight the mauve climbed the walls. Alexander looked up, shaking his head.

Padded. Everything was padded, or cushioned, or 'gathered'. A tufted universe. Curtains with tiers, draped and draped again,

holding down whatever departing spirit might be attempting an escape. Rubber tiles. Rubber floors so you wouldn't click or skid, only squeak. God-awful lighting. Alexander made a mental note: who did their lighting? A guest book. Good Lord, that wasn't a guest book! "Fine exhibit"; "so lifelike"; "merveilleuse".

Shiny, squeaky floors. Rooms with signs outside the doors. Mildred Rutherford, Paul Roger Lagasse, Vivian Tourniquette, Dr. Frederick Aurelie. Alfreda had gone on ahead and emerged now from the room. "Alexander," she said, "in here."

Silence as he paused before the doorway; silence and candle flickerings. Puffy satin pillows lining the roof of the casket. He could see that from a distance. A man of medium height with greying hair approached him and Alexander fought back the instinct to squint. A hand extended.

"Hello, Alex."

"Hello, Harry."

He had not seen Horace in three years. Even Horace had become puffier and more pale around the fringes. Too bad he was not like Alfreda, with her outline defined.

"I don't know anybody," Alexander said.

Horace nodded. "It was sudden, Alex. They didn't have a chance."

Alexander's eyes followed the brocade swirl on the chair beside them. "What happened?"

Horace nodded to a few people who entered the room. "Don't know. Weather, maybe. Ed Simmons is still alive, remember Ed? That's his wife just walked in...uhm...Sylvie, yes. I should go over and say something." Horace looked closely at Alexander. "You alright?"

Horace moved away toward the small woman near the door. Alexander studied the faces in the room. Three young girls took turns walking over to the casket, looked inside, made sneezing motions, put kleenex to mouth, departed. Alexander noticed the young rounded breasts that were rising and falling to long feminine sighs. This was another crop of students, not the ones he remembered.

There was that girl...giggling female, third row Geology. They had come from the class Christmas party, stumbling up the stone steps, he nuzzling up to her rabbit-fur coat, smelling animal and eggnog. They were talking about a mutual friend who had gone to India to have his consciousness raised.

"Euan said, it's like raising yourself from the dead," she pondered.

"With Euan, it would be," Alexander muttered, eyes closed, kissing her cold lips, tangling fingers in her icy hair.

"Meditation...levitation," she whispered, trying to stick her tongue into his mouth, brushing a gloved hand along the front of his jeans.

He unlocked the door; the hallway was dark.

"Where's Professor Aurelie?" she asked, holding on to the wall for support as she pulled off her boots.

"Tuesday evening. B-115. 7:00-9:30 p.m. 'Preparing Archaeological Data', Dr. Frederick Aurelie," he litanied. No Christmas party for Aurelie's night crew. He tugged at her coat.

"Don't Alex...I'm cold," she hugged the animal close.

"You could take this off," he suggested, masterfully booting his knapsack into the hall closet as he removed the coat from her shoulders, "and I could do my level best to keep you warm. Well, not level exactly..."

"Oh, Alex..." hitting him with her copy of Jesse D. Jennings's Prehistory of North America.

He tried guiding her into the living room. Her short skirt was green and she was wearing a red turtleneck. She was fulfilling his Santa's Elf fantasy. The legs were especially good, he thought. Stocking stuffers.

"Come over here, and I'll light a fire." He shuffled the kindling, glancing over his shoulder at her. She gurgled that she was freezing and wiggled out into the hallway, arms clamped around herself.

"Is this Dr. Aurelie's office?" she called from the hall.

"Uh...my father doesn't appreciate strangers around the Inner Sanctum," he yelled. He got up and followed her into the room.

"I'm hardly a stranger, Alex, I've been in his course since September. But, wow, look at this library! Why do you use the one

at school, Alex? Your dad..."

He watched her run her hand along the edge of the desk, gaze enraptured at the pipes in the stand beside the lamp. She was one of those women whose attractiveness increased when he turned down the sound and just watched the picture. She was all frowns and dimples as he steered her back into the living room. She wanted to smoke and listen to some Jefferson Airplane, but he insisted on playing Bing Crosby because it was the Holiday Season.

Then she was on the sofa doing what he'd never known elves to do except in his fantasy, moaning that she hated Bing Crosby, he just moaning, as the voice on the stereo proclaimed:

Oh the weather outside is frightful,
But the fire is so delightful,
And since we've no place to go
Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow...

Alexander sat on the brocade chair and stared intently at the leaf stuck to the sole of his shoe. So many colours in one leaf, and the curious fold where his heel had pressed it. The students were beginning to leave, he could hear them. It occurred to Alexander that these steamy girls probably knew the present tense Frederick Aurelie better than he did.

A hook-nosed, hawk woman descended on him, pulling his arm. "You sir," she jostled, "are you Alexander Aurelie? Alexander Aurelie, the writer?"

He looked up, trying to concentrate, and said nothing. The woman recovered a semblance of decorum, released his arm and continued.

"I am Mrs. Walter Forsythe-Jones...of the Womens' League?"

spoken as though it clarified things. "The Womens' League of what?"

He did not want to know.

"Dr. Frederick Aurelie was supposed to give a talk next week on Mayan Art, which we were sponsoring. Well, you know how disappointed we are. I mean, a tragedy..." eyes appropriately lowered to half-mast. "But since you are in town Mr. Aurelie, it is Mr. Aurelie, is it not? I recognize you from your jacket covers...do you think you could manage to work in a reading?"

A heavy amber encrustation bounced against her chest, the wrecking ball deepening the crevice between the large breasts. Feet had been stuffed preposterously into tiny alligator shoes. He was looking at these shoes. He pondered them very seriously and said, "I have always wondered why rotund people insist on prying their feet into fashionably stunted shoes. It only makes balancing all the more incredulous." He turned away, relieved that the occasion warranted no further response. The shoes stood there for a few moments, then limped away.

It was so stuffy. Chronic taxicab scent. He was watching Horace. Old Harry. How Alexander had been ashamed of his conservative, reliable brother. That was it, wasn't it? That Harry was ordinary. That his wife Sandra and children Michael and Stephen were predictable. The shunning that had gone on over the years. Yet, there he was, the perpetual gentleman. Alexander had never really considered the word until he had applied it to Harry.

Horace saw him standing alone and hastened over. "Alex," he said, "I never had the opportunity to tell you, but I really liked the novel."

Alexander looked at his brother. "Thanks Harry."

"Did you have a good flight?"

"Well I got here in one piece," Alexander said and winced as Vaudeville chuckled at his timing.

"You...uhm, don't have to go back right away, do you?"

Alexander shook his head. "I quit the telegram job when I heard the news."

Horace pursed his lips momentarily but said lightly, "Do you think that was wise, Alex?"

Old Harry. Same job for twenty years, same worried glance. "I'm sure they'll get over it."

"You know that...I'm the executor of the will. I mean, father's estate amounts to...there'll be funds..."

"Not here, please. Not now." Harry was being the older brother again. "Where are Sandra and the kids?"

"She decided that all this was a bit much for the boys. She'll be at the funeral."

Alexander frowned at the woman's oft repeated attempts to keep her children naive. He hadn't seen Sandra or the kids in at least four years, but the boys hadn't been toddlers then. Sandra had a habit of saying "Sssh" to Alexander's jokes when the boys were around.

Horace pursed his lips. He was glancing furtively and motioned Alexander over to the far wall. "Alex, there's something I have to tell you," he said. "When they examined his...father's body, there were strange markings and bruises."

"The crash?" Alexander volunteered.

Horace shook his head. "That's what I thought too. But these were too precise...on the sides of the tongue, in the thighs, in the penis..."

Alexander stared blankly at his brother. "What?"

"I don't know. I want to talk to Simmons, but he's really in a bad shape. The doctors aren't convinced he's going to make it."

"But does he..."

"No. That much I did find out in a roundabout way. No markings. What do you think it means, Alex?"

Alexander watched the hawk-woman's nose as she pecked away at a conversation. "I don't know."

Horace pressed him. "He never...told you anything?"

Alexander was grinding the leaf-soled shoe into the floor.

"Never intimated anything in a letter?"

"Me? He tell me anything?" Fists stuffed into pockets. He spoke in a forcibly controlled voice. "Harry, you know we haven't been in touch." The room was crammed with people, and the air was all breathed up. He made gulping sounds and flung the words, "You know the man and I don't talk!"

Alfreda was speaking to a cluster of people over near the

casket.

Alexander could see that she was the object of much curiosity. The only daughter of Frederick Aurelie, and a nun at that! She would kneel for a while, and the people would move aside. Then as she stood up, they would swarm around her as though the habit she was wearing was made of flypaper. Alfreda took it all with an acquired humility. Alexander's face softened; she was perfect.

"Alex, you must be tired," Horace said. "Why don't you step outside and get some air, until it's time..."

Even now, Alexander thought. Even now the buffer zone. Forever the older brother, standing nearer the casket, shaking the unknown hands. Alexander held his brother's forearm briefly. "Thanks, Harry."

He stood outside breathing in the night air. He was shivering. The room had been hot, the air outside too cold. He just stood there watching his breath form mist clouds. The shivering was totally involuntary. He could feel his body quivering spasmodically but knew the action was automatic.

The whole atmosphere was complying with the situation. It had become foggy. He no longer had a glimpse of the road sloping up the mountain, but he knew that on the other side of the fog a searchlight buffeted the thick air. Alexander remembered a time before Vaudeville and counted to ten.

Everyone was leaving; they were all leaving at once. Do the dead have visiting hours? The idea struck him as extremely funny,

and he found himself chuckling aloud. Even he was alarmed at this, but could do nothing to stop himself. He saw his sister approaching him and sang, gasping, "What's it all about, Alfie / Is it just for the moment we live?"

Alfreda stood beside him. "They're closing the casket, Alexander. Alex, you must." She held out her hand. "You must."

"I am not able..." he protested. "What is left...I can't deal with artifacts!"

They had ruined his mother's face. Covered it with colours her life never knew. They had turned her beautiful black hair into rough, flat fuzz that had hurt his child's hand as he touched it.

The nun tugged at his sleeve and led him to the dead body. Death masks are strange. His father had shown him one when he was a child. Cold, smooth death faces with eyes that never closed. The mask captured only one expression and riveted it onto eternity. Some were made of gold or silver, the treasures of the tribe. There was the Mayan jade. Mayan death masks with earplugs, jade beads, delicate tones along the sloping forehead.

"This...this...what is this?" Alexander pointed angrily, raising his voice. He waved his finger up and down the body, the skin seemed stretched across the face, gathering at the jowls and at the base of the jaw. "What...this skin, yellow peeling parched... what've They done?" he shuddered, seeing the swollen lips, the bruises that the shirt and jacket did not completely conceal.

"God, They've flayed him!" He had a hand on either side of the casket and was shaking it. "And now They're trying to put the skin back on." Alfreda held one arm and Horace ran to the other side. "Only it won't fit! You fucking Demented Jugglers, it won't fit!"

He wrenched his hands free and jabbed out wildly, actually hitting the body. As his hand grazed the face, he felt his legs give way. Horace had knee-bent him from behind. Falling from the casket, he lay on the floor looking at shoes. Horace's impeccable brogues, the attendant's black oxfords, Alfreda's invisible orthopedics. The handles on the sides of the coffin looked like little door knockers. Hello, he thought, anybody home?

Muttering going on above his head. From where he sprawled he could not see the shadow falling across his father's body. Creaking; groaning of wood, groaning of voices. Alexander tried to cry out, but flower-scented pillows covered his face.

He had insisted on walking back to the house. He was aching with the damp cold and the curious spurting pain in his right knee; he'd forgotten Horace was capable of that sort of thing. The fog had somewhat dissipated. Alexander's body still shook involuntarily; he turned up the collar of his jacket and trudged along. He felt wretched, began counting the layers of his skin, and cringed when he got to the dermis.

What was difficult was this silent, permanent barrier, this

absolute definition of tenses. Father now existed in the past tense and what was difficult was that the present had never been a particularly good place to find Frederick Aurelie. Seems the man had always moved more freely, until now.

His knees are rough and stained green, little shafts of grass sticking to them, but he does not notice. He is also unaware of the scab on his leg which has loosened in play. He is aware that as he runs his shorts get longer on his legs and shorter on his body, yet he pulls them up absent-mindedly, used to the ritual.

He has left the others and come over to the picnic table. The slabs of wood are prickly, and he scratches his leg on the side until it begins to hurt. Sun is drying the table, soon they will be able to spread the cloth. He pulls off his wet running shoes and places them on the table to dry.

His mother sees this from her chair near the white bark tree and calls out, "Alex, dear, don't take your shoes off like that," and looks concerned. She beckons to a thin man sitting at the same table as the boy. The man is busy and straightens up slowly as he looks over at the boy.

"Here, what's the problem?" the man asks quietly.

He holds out the shoes. "These, soakers," he explains.

The man nods out toward the two children, playing with newly-found friends in the distance. "Don't you want to join them?"

He is tired of being four and a half, tired of the questions

he refuses to answer. He shrugs and pulls his feet up on the bench. "Soakers," he says again. He has the pine cone in his pocket. He has retrieved it from the small ravine but the wet feet are the price. "What are you doing?" he asks the man opposite him. The head is bent forward and the boy notices that the hair is see through. There is reddish-brown skin underneath and it looks like there are holes in some places where a hair should have come out, or used to come out. He is talking into these holes, hoping his father will hear the voice inside his head.

The man's mouth opens, but the head does not look up. "I am working on something very special, Sandor." The man always calls the boy by that name, which shortens it. The boy does not know all his letters yet, but knows that his name has more in it than either Harry's or Alfie's does. His father is only keeping things fair.

"Is is a present?" he asks, studying the stiff sad face.

The man pauses. "No," he says, laughing a little, "it's a past."

The boy fuzzes out of the conversation and picks at something carved into the table. He knows some of the letters, "D". and "S" and "P", and an "X" all by itself, surrounded by a heart shape. "What's this?" he asks, not looking up because not expecting an answer.

The man walks around the table and reads the message. "It says,

D.S. loves J.P."

The boy wonders, "Which one says love?" He will put it on a paper and give it to his mother with the pine cone.

The man points at the "X". "It doesn't actually say 'love', they have used this "X" instead."

"Why?"

"Well, it's easier to carve." The man looks amusedly at the boy. "It's shorter, I suppose. You understand, Sandor?"

The man pats the boy's hair, and the boy immediately shakes his head. He sees his mother reading under the trees. He will go over and let her read to him. She reads things he doesn't understand, but she never seems to mind if he just sits there with her. She sits with the sun behind her, her pale dress rustling in the breeze. She is wearing a white kerchief tied behind her hair which curls out dark and shiny at the back. He loves the way her hair smells, all sweet and a little like the pine cone.

"Do you think mummy is pretty?" he asks suddenly.

The question takes the man by surprise. The man moves, looking first at the boy's face then at the shape of the woman in the distance. His father smiles to himself, but the boy sees it, sees the man look at the woman with a mixture of admiration and pride. Oddly, the boy feels himself beginning to smile as well. For a moment they grin shyly at one another.

He was standing under the street lamp looking at the evening sky. The throbbing pain seemed to have travelled, he now felt cramps in his stomach, while his breath came in short furious gasps. The present had not been a good place to find Frederick Aurelie. Alexander pulled out his wallet and flipped through the faded pictures, shaking his head.

So am I any different? I exist on borrowed memories. There are photos in my wallet because there is a place for photos; most of them found in old boxes in the basement. The photographs I carry are of people my grandparents knew - young Archie Nesbitt, killed at Somme, Laurelie Leclerc, the recluse. Borrowed memories, borrowed lives, stories about them told to an interested listener. Impressionable.

The impression, there it is, the one picture of the parents. The detail is important. Plotting, charting, chalk noises on a blank slate. Where they were, why. Was the weather fine, did it rain? What particular day was it - the year, check it out, look up the old calendars, add and subtract the leap years, what day was it? Standing there, father in a t-shirt, his arm around mother, what kind of day was it for them, the day of the picture?

Alexander was focussing on the grey and yellow photograph, the plastic pocket warped, its surface spotted, or perhaps the picture. He remembered something Laurelie had said in Stalagmite Statues: "And the world becomes a world of one again. Cavern airless and skyless as we sit, stalagmite statues in clusters or alone. This

is a place of veiled altruism, a place for those that are left." He had never spat out these words as angrily as he did now, while his feet stepped one in front of the other leading him along the road up the mountain.

Alfreda had left the door unlocked and he entered quietly into the blackened hallway. He pushed open the study door and flicked on the light. Dim rays appeared alongside the rows of book cases. On the top row to the left of the desk were his father's own volumes. On the desk itself were his latest notes. They had been sent from the site and had just arrived. The notes were to have provided the basis for the proposed lecture tour outlined in his project itinerary. According to the university bulletin on the desk he was to have spoken extensively on his new research in the Palenque area of the Yucatan peninsula.

Alexander touched the back of the chair. He had never really considered how the furniture would look without the imposing presence of his father. It was as if the room itself would not have existed without Frederick Aurelie. But now here was this worn desk, the padded leather chair and odorous pipes in the stand. Alexander turned on the goose necked lamp beside the notes, sending light deep into the grain of the wood. Slowly and deliberately he slid his backbone down the chair.

This was his father's view of the house, all those years with only a half-foot of open space from which to see outside, to watch

little Sandor running past the door. Had his father noticed how the boy's young steps quickened as he passed? No, his father would not have noticed. His father had not noticed the changing of steps, altering of views, and then sudden shock when the boy was no longer the boy.

Suddenly Alexander wanted to find them. He wanted to know that his father had at least seen them; they had never been acknowledged personally. He closely scanned the shelves of aging volumes. Where. He nervously opened the left-hand desk drawer, it rattled as he shook the sticking frame. Its contents caught the light, pieces of clay with tags on them, carefully catalogued. Hours and months of agonizing work to accomplish - a chipped Mayan vase, a statue of one of the Chacs, or one of the other deities.

Alexander pulled open the center drawer, moved a few pencils and newspaper clippings and there they were. Alexander's three books did not equal the length of his father's first work, but they had been sent. He picked up Centipede. The book had been dedicated to the memory of his mother, but Alexander was reading the inscription he had addressed to his father: "And so, to you. Always, Sandor." Sandor. Only for him.

The pages in Centipede were dog-eared, he'd actually read them. Alfreda had once said that father was disturbed at the family references in Centipede, but then, as a member of the centipede,

so was she. Alexander had never heard what he'd thought of Closet Humour. Alfreda naturally disapproved of the stories that 'promoted licentious behaviour', but Alfreda had a low Catholic threshold for bodily functions. Horace, as always, 'admired' Alexander's efforts. Their father, it would seem, had not.

His father had begun Stalagmite Statues, a triangle corner turned down on page 173. Past page 173 the pages clung together in a taut decision; he'd never finished it. Alexander found himself wishing his father had completed it, had left chalky fingerprints on the pages, something.

His father had ceased reading at the point in the story where Laurelie, the backwoods recluse, had come upon a silver fox dying in a trap. Laurelie had begun to question her moral outlook as she watched the animal chew at its hind leg. She had been very disturbed, and this is where Alexander's father closed the book. That was the point, though, wasn't it? Chip around the vase, reconstruct the vase, but never really question the vase. Study the bones but never the flesh; look at the son Alexander and his foolish attempts, and disparage both. And you can't do that any longer, can you, father?

He stared at the ink scrawls. This was his father, the enigma in the book-walled study, the name on the volumes, alright; you refused to study flesh but expected me to study bones, bones that tell you what it is but not who...alright! There are only

the bones now, Frederick Aurelie. It's all I have to go on and that's what you always wanted, isn't it? A grubby scavenger picking through bones.

"So I'll scavenge," Alexander said, gripping the volumes determinedly. You trained me despite myself, instilled curiosity, and now I can only find out who by studying what. Alexander picked up Stalagmite Statues and turned to page 253, to a place his father had never reached, and read silently, his lips pressed tightly together:

I sit by the ice cold stove, the firewood frosted outside the door. My ankle is swollen again, the boots do not fit properly. I must go for supplies but cannot bear the long trip to the village. They stare at me so strangely, as though they feel that I am unaware I use a rope to keep my loose coat fastened, and buy provisions as if each trip there were my last. They do not know me so they clear a path when I walk, or watch me from their windows, wag tongues and fingers at their youngsters not safe behind the glass.

Alexander stood silently. The Vaudeville Gods were listening, anxious to make him a laughing stock, sobs bouncing off planets, sighs the major amusement. Waiting for a weakness, waiting for a Wimpdom Symptom. Alexander quivered and his face contorted but he did not cry aloud.

It was early dawn when he stepped into the hallway, a pale bleary-eyed man looking with puzzlement at the journals in his hands.

They were not made for him and did not fit him, though his

father was a tall and thin man too. They were not made for him and fit him loosely, yet he shrugged and stretched and cringed and put them on.

Alexander could not sleep. Since the funeral he had remained awake, leafing by day through the lecture notes, dozing briefly and watching the searchlight by night. He had rifled through his father's closet and come up with two pairs of khaki work pants and three plaid shirts which would suffice for a wardrobe while he remained in the house. They still smelled of tobacco, his father's vice, the Mayan zigar, Nahuatl picietl that these people had so loved. Alexander pulled the pants on, flipped the shirt across his shoulders. The smell was never far from him, and he wore the clothes gingerly on the edge of his skin.

His skin had tingled annoyingly since the funeral. The family had stood foolishly and hopelessly around the coffin while Alfreda and the priest spoke a Catholic language to one another in low tones. Sandra had been true to her word. The boys had come, had not understood. They would rather have been elsewhere. They had hardly known their grandfather; you couldn't blame them. Alexander paused at this thought.

The study where Frederick Aurelie had squinted away his nights was empty, succumbing at last to the slumber wish of the silent house. Alexander walked through the oak-walled hallways

trying to shake off the squirmish feeling, recoiling suddenly from empty plant stands, avoiding the dusty eyes of portraits. He had set up a desk in the kitchen, the brightest room, and removing what he thought he would need from the study, closed the door, intending to leave it closed unless absolutely necessary.

Alfreda had gone back to the convent and Horace had made Alexander promise to keep in touch while he was in the city. Alexander nodded, shaking his hand; when Horace's car was pulling out of the driveway, Alexander was already shaking his head. Horace would see to things, as always. He was the executor of the will. He had already informed Alexander that it was holograph, very old, and had not been updated in years. He had sighed audibly when Alexander refused to attend the reading, which in turn caused Alfreda some alarm. She had asked him how it would look, Alexander's eyes widening as she clicked her tongue. "To whom, Alfie?" When it was over he learned that the house had been left to the three of them, along with assets, to be divided equally; the artifacts, including the papers, had been left to the university.

He'd been trying to get the journal preliminaries done. Father had been known for keeping scrupulously organized notes, yet these were a chaotic jumble. So unlike the man. The kids had grown up scrambled, but the research? Never. This bothered Alexander. The lecture notes were not as disorganized, they'd had some preparation. In addition, the first book of the journals

showed traces of editing. But the second journal - he could not even begin to make sense of it. Loose scraps of paper fell out or hung precariously from the books, Mayan day-signs, glyphs, rough sketches and maps were tacked in here and there, arrows and asteriks decorating the margins. Something was not right.

He is fiddling with the strap on his knapsack as the dean stands opposite, the desk between them. The man is being good natured, too good natured, while his pinched academic smile displays a chipped tooth.

"Of course," Professor Rothwell is saying, "we realize that you have had other preoccupations of late, what with your father's recent dig, we expect you have been assisting him in transcribing data, but..."

"No, sir."

"Excuse me?"

Alexander is deliberately focussing on the strap as he again reties it. He looks up. "No, sir, I have not been transcribing my father's notes. And I have not been transcribing my own notes... sir."

The chipped smile flickers as the rest of the face returns the stare. "Then what's the problem, Aurelie? You've had the very best kind of example; your father..."

"My father," Alexander hoists the knapsack on one shoulder,

"is Dr. Frederick Aurelie, King of Taco Land. Harry manages the store and Alfie is the nun." He cannot think of anything more to say so he turns and walks out of the dean's office. He does not come back.

Three partially drunk cups of coffee were beside his elbow, the cream forming lines around the circumferences of the mugs. Alexander had not eaten since the day before, he felt lightheaded and was doodling on his notepad. A bewhiskered lion in a parachute jumped out of an air-balloon, flailing limbs wildly. Alexander sang:

I'm afraid there's no denyin'
I'm just a dandy-lion,
A fate I don't desoive...

Oh, Cowardly Lion, prancing through the landscape, on Oz or anywhere else. To have your vain reassurance, yes, even them now. Ain't it the truth, ain't it the truth. The push and pull of these stubborn wiry truths. Why was the truth always so difficult to encounter? Because it was most often arrived at painfully? Harry telling him he was lying about the missing football, pressing him, making him admit it. "It's true!" Alexander screaming, hands on ears.

The subtle revelations of growing up, those resounding thuds of recognition, those cradled pent-up dreams. The positives

that seemed so hopeless until the first ear-burning, organ twitching sensations of intoxicating life, when miracles were an everyday occurrence. The gaining and losing of trust, those failed, taped up dreams.

Alexander drew a flower in the lion's outstretched paw. An orchid. It startled him because he realized that this was the mark he'd seen so many times as he cursorily flipped through the journals, the tiny orchids his father had consistently and inappropriately sketched in the margins.

Alexander tried to recall the flower's significance. Three years as an archaeology student had taught him little, taught him primarily that he could not devote his life to the study. Son of the famous, hoping to make a name for himself in his father's field. How foolish to have thought - but that was the point, wasn't it? Attempt the unlikely, aspire to the unavailing. Sandor Aurelie, his father's pride and joy, his father's shame and sadness. "I tried," he spoke into the murky coffee cup, the heavy white line of cream lapping at the edges like soap on a river. "Goddam you, but I tried."

Then he remembered. The clusia, matapalo, the "kill-tree". Huge plant, blossoming, enveloping the tree, adapting itself to the form and thriving alongside the tree; the matapalo gigantic, powerful, strangling the tree in its vice-like grip. "Kill-tree," he said, and was confused.

His eyes were sore from lack of sleep, the tension not relieved by the Anacin tablets he'd consumed. "Matapalo," he said slowly, corrugating his brow as hundreds of Anacin children screamed and splashed in a pool somewhere in his head. "Matapalo," as he shuffled books and papers into stacks.

The radio was droning alongside him; its host had eased his listeners into an old Everly Brothers song, and Alexander slumped into the depths of the cushioned armchair he had dragged in from the living room. More cushions, more tucks, a tufted universe. Alexander was singing along, his hands beating percussion on the sides of the chair. He put his feet up on the table and closed his eyes, singing:

When I need you, in the night,

He threw his head back, the headache in his brain toppling with it.

When I want you, da, da, da, da
To hold me tight...
Whenever I want you
All I have to do, is dream...

His foot moved and spilt coffee onto his writing tablet.

"Dream, dream, dream, dream, dream..."

Strong bent beams of light, white. Alexander near the exit, transfixed, hand on door frame. Unobserved, he is disguised in

harsh colours, orange and brown checked pants, green frock coat, purple fright wig. Drunken drummer from abandoned orchestra pit slouching backstage. Suddenly he is flamenco-thumbs on the bottoms of Melitta cans. No cymbals, he yells from off-stage, "Disssssshhhhhh..."

Showtime in Vaudeville! Major Gods in the front row, throwing popcorn and picking teeth with long, pointed fingernails. Heavy velvet curtains still down, but counterweights ready to be dropped. They struggle as the nooses are fitted around their necks. A fraying clown checks them out, munching on a licorice snake, grinning, grinning blackish teeth glowing, eyes burning. Standing on the catwalk over the stage he cackles and pushes the weights off the ledge. The ropes snap taut; the bodies dangle above the floor as the curtain is raised. Only now they are swinging from parachutes, twisted ropes around their necks, arms and legs. A small plane is crashed stage-left, burning beneath the bodies. Ropes lowered by licorice clown...feet and legs lapped up by the thirsty flames.

"Wait!" Alexander screams.

Arms gripping him, his own, stumbling back to consciousness. Body aching. "Ah...ah, shit!" gripping the coffee-saturated pages which had dried into a mille-feuille. Bloody Wimpdom Symptom, he shivered. The plane. This was difficult, this not knowing. How do you live through the horror, how do you suffer and survive

the terror of another's death if you did not even know what the terror had been?

He was heating up peas, having chipped them from a block of frozen vegetation he had discovered in the ice age at the back of the freezer. He burnt his fingers as he extracted one of two peas that looked gamey. Gamey peas, my biggest horror, he thought. Milksop existence. What had happened? Ed Simmons would know. Simmons.

The hospital, the Royal Vic, is also on the mountain. Yep, need never leave, 'specially with the Côte des Neiges Cemetery just a headstone's throw away. Alexander adopted the down home, country train of thought as he walked along. It was better to have more than one voice, in case They were listening. He loped along, hands jutting out of pockets, plaid shirt sashaying out of the pants. He hadn't phoned to check, he really should have called. It would be difficult to get past the nurses and lying to them was a nod at the Scheming Vaudevillians.

"I'm his son," he told the nurse. She looked puzzled, checked the chart, and raised her eyes.

"I'm sorry...his son?"

"Ya...uh...Sam. Claybourne."

She continued staring.

"The illegitimate son," spoken as though every family had one. He hoped she wouldn't take offence. "Never did tell poor

Sylvie about it, woulda broke her poor heart. Nope, I'da not even found out about it if my wife hadn'ta seen a snippet in the paper."

The nurse shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I really don't think it's possible..." The Vaudevillians were listening. They liked the style, They especially enjoyed tall tales. Three seconds later the Phillipine nurse dropped the I.V. bottle as she dragged the tubular old man down the hall. "Excuse me," nurses coagulating in the corridor. Alexander nodded up in the direction of pharmaceutical supplies. Sometimes it paid to acknowledge Them.

Poor bugger, he thought, as he stared at the older man. Arms, or what had been arms, were now mummified stumps hanging in traction; a bandage covering the head and sloping over one eye. He couldn't have seen Alexander come in if he'd wanted to. He was sleeping.

Alexander approached the bed. Silence was challenged by three sounds, the absurd sucking of air through tubes, the quiet but insistent beeping as Simmons stubbornly clung to the life in the machines, and the curious low chuckles reverberating off Jupiter.

"Simmons? Ed? I only have a couple of seconds here," Alexander spoke, more to himself, he thought, than to the man. He lightly touched the collarbone area of the body, and a faint

groan escaped from the bandages, "I know, I know, and you have maybe less." He didn't know if Simmons needed any comforting, he didn't know if the man was there. He remembered the papal ritual, where the bishop taps the dead pontiff's head three times with a silver hammer, calling his name. A way of finding out if anyone was home.

"Please," Alexander whispered persistently.

The papier-mâché head turned sideways and the eye flitted open. There was absolutely no recognition, there was no glimpse of great pain.

"Simmons...I'm Alexander Aurelie, Frederick's son...can you hear me...Dr. Aurelie's son...I have to know, you can help me. What went wrong?"

At first the eye moistened, as though tears were to be the response. Then it opened wider. The head started shaking and the heartbeat rate increased.

"Frederick Aurelie," Alexander repeated. "What happened?"

The eye closed rapidly, the head shuddered, arm stumps shaking on their leashes.

"Simmons...the crash."

From the depths of his stomach came a moan, and from somewhere under the bandages a voice, "I...the crash. I...no," he shook.

"No!" shrieking, kicking the bedclothes with his good foot, bashing it against the low bars on the bed.

"The plane, the journals...what is it, Ed?"

"Aurelie...crash!" His whole body spastic, "Crash."

Alexander felt his arms being yanked behind him; for a second he looked like Simmons, fighting his restraints. The orderly pushed him aside. The nurse ran past him to give the screaming voice a sedative.

"I crash...Matapalo!"

The word skittered into Alexander's brain. "Matapalo, Matapalo," the man's voice died away as Alexander ran down the dimly lit hallway.

He was sitting very stiffly on the park bench, arms held close, fingers curling under the edges of the bench and squeezing the wood. He rocked himself slowly back and forth while he airlessly whistled. A tune whirled in his brain, the lady in pale satin waltzing to the music. She was elegant, her young slender body beautifully outlined by the long shiny dress as she danced. The music played:

What'll I do when you are far away
And I am blue, what'll I do...

He almost caught a glimpse of her face this time, but saw only the eyes as she swept by. And then, before he could stop himself, he looked up at the orchestra just in time - always just in time - to see the musicians muffled and subdued, one by one being replaced by a Vaudevillian, blasting clanging screeching dancefloor ladies dropping gloves men stepping on feet the

Deranged Vaudevillians howling cymbals hashing. The woman in pale satin jumbled her steps, her faceless partner faltered, yet she regained her momentum, defied the din and glided gracefully across the floor. One of the Vaudevillians pointed at Alexander and shook his finger menacingly, a grin spreading on his face as he spat into the microphone:

Oh, the drums go bang and the cymbals clang
And the horns they blare away...

Alexander put his hands over his ears and mouthed, "Shut up!", rocking himself harder.

"Something wrong?"

Alexander didn't hear until he was prodded to attention with a rubber-tipped cane.

"Hey, you alright?"

Alexander looked over.

"Chippy night," the old man on the other end of the bench exclaimed. "Yup, nights like this, autumn evenings, chippy frost." He let out a hoot, and cracked his cane down hard on the empty space between the two bodies. "Chippy, eh?"

Alexander perused the still stinging bench and shifted slightly.

"Yes, uh...nothing at all like a chippy night, sir," he father-knows-bested the man, eyeing the dangerously wavering arm. "Yes, sir... uh, just a minute." He carefully maneuvered the shaking cane so that it pointed outward. "Look, is your hobby caning benches, or what?"

The man put aside his cane and grunted his body into a more comfortable position. "What's your problem, son? It's Friday night and she won't let you in? Well hell, look at you! Heh! Whoever she is, you couldn't afford her."

Alexander's baggy work pants sagged and the plaid shirt protruded from beneath the thick wool sweater. He inhaled the faint scent of tobacco. "My father's," he said.

The man looked at Alexander's clothes again, then at his own and said, "Natty dresser."

Alexander pointed to the cane. "You hide the booze in there?"

The man drew his wrinkles up higher on his body. "You never said what was wrong," he almost pouted.

Alexander looked at the man's intense face, and replied more gently, "I don't want to go home."

"Why not?"

"My father, something strange." He kicked at the pavement with the toe of his shoe, scuffing at a candy wrapper and a bus transfer, watching the soft suede attack the tar.

"Looke here, surely you're old enough to deal with yer father. My son now, he always managed to get around me somehow. Hell, it's not like you have to account for everywhere's you been or for how long."

Alexander stared down, laughing quietly. "Wrong...it's his line of work."

The man propped the cane on the ground for support, and leaned forward to talk to Alexander. "What do you mean? What does he do?"

Alexander felt a soft, gelatinous substance lapping at his brain, waiting to enter every crease and crevice. "He's dead."

Dead. Shuffle, flip, snap. Wiping grease from painted eyes, throwing away the tissue, dead. Powder puffing face and hide, laughter, grunts and giggles. He knew this sensation. It was the undulating fluidity of an unfrozen ice pack, the liquid consistency of a loose lemon pie. Pratfall time, eh? You fuckers.

You're being ridiculous, she is saying in that trained, even voice. I wish you'd stop talking like this, as though any of this really existed, as though something outside of ourselves is to blame.

He pressed his knees together. Ah, damnation, Ruth. Three inches away from me on this map of the planet. Oh, I keep track of you, and the distance between us, just as you used to before you left. Going out to dinner now, Ruth? Staying in with a friend?

Our room, the honeysuckle outside, the breeze sifted through screens. Fragrant, sneezing flowers, pollen level tingling when you entered. Cool, pale dress that anticipated the anemic fervor of our passion. Your discarded yellow dress and the moon, reflecting off one another as I held your stranger's body close. Sometimes I

imagined you a silent princess, with eyes that served and a heart that ruled. Or you became an elusive colour, a quality of violet that I could not reproduce despite countless divings among reds and blues. But most often you remain for me the thin girl with glasses, lying next to me without glasses, gazing at your colours in the moon. Love to you a nervous twitch, a sublunar-tic.

Three inches away, I am busying my fingers, employing myself to keep the spirit moving. The yawning cavern inside where you used to live gets drafty, but I'm used to this weather. It keeps me in tune with the seasons, the passing of time, and other tremulous things. The soft curve of inner thigh and the scent of honeysuckle.

Does scent travel in a straight line? I wonder. Thousands of invisible lines extending from my body. The broken line from myself to you. Broken lines signify: cut here. Any child with blunt-edged scissors knows that. So cut keenly and evenly, cutting lifelines. Maybe because you did it so easily, because it amputated me and all you felt were occasional Wimpdom Symptoms. Maybe because I guard this Empty Space, but you, you let the Deranged Squatters take up every space you relinquish.

The old man was nodding away on the bench, and Alexander gently nudged him. "Hey...what's your name, anyway?" The man belched on the Ar of Arnett. "Hey, Arnett," Alexander picked up

the old man's cane, and helped him gather his folds of skin and clothing. He stood up so the Decaying Comedians in the back row could see him, and allowed the old man to hold onto his arm as he struggled to his feet. Sand-bottomed clowns bounce right back when pummelled, They shout. Maybe because you're a sand-bottomed clown, Ruth.

Alexander arched his tall, lean body around the sagging body, and the sagging body dozily exclaimed, "Hey, is that snow we're getting?"

Alexander grasped the man more firmly. "Ignore it," he breathed angrily. "Popcorn."

Arnett asleep in the living room, and I in the kitchen with you. So, what are the rules now, Frederick Aurelie? Alexander opened the second field journal to where he had left off. There was a layout drawing of Palenque that covered two pages. It displayed locations of the various ruins on site, with the Chiapas mountains to the side and the River Otulum running through the ancient city. Alexander turned the page.

F.A. PALENQUE : BOOK OF CHILAM BALAM OF CHUMAYEL:

Re.: Tobacco

"Son, bring me a firefly of the night. Its odor shall pass to the north and to the west."

The tobacco smell was all around him as he sat in his father's clothes. The plaid shirt rested on his shoulders like hands.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE FOLIATED CROSS : JULY 25:

This theory that relates the Foliated Cross to an ancient counterpart in Angkor Wat, Cambodia, needs more consideration. Interesting notion. The cross, the tree of life with its outstretched limbs in the likeness of the maize plant is intriguing, practical in its mystery. This temple was dedicated in a.d. 692. This was Chan-Bahlum's building, as was the Temple of the Sun. The bas-relief commemorates the transfer of power.

F.A. PALENQUE : JULY 26:

Re.: Time

It is attributed to deity. The Mayans see time as having neither beginning nor end. The Long Count is a reference point, but not where time begins. Time is Timeless.

The Gods carry time on their backs. Sun/God/Day - the word for all these is kinh. Kinh is the Day, Day and the Gods. The Gods carry time, the lucky and unlucky destinies; all is cyclic.

The silence was beginning to bother him. He had bitten down the sides of pencils, setting his teeth into the soft word "Venus" imprinted on the sea green painted wood. Tiny tree trunks with leaden sap, he thought, little erasers of life, as all the pencils stood coyly on erasers and the thin streaks of Frederick Aurelie swam in and out of his eyes.

Arnett's mumbling and snoring reached Alexander in the kitchen, and this was strangely comforting to him. He tripped upstairs in the dark to the linen closet, felt around on the shelf for one of his mother's coverlets. He brought it downstairs, pausing to glance at the pattern as he entered the lighted kitchen. The background was navy blue with bright patchwork stars and there was a verse embroidered around the edges. Alexander smiled, remembering how mother sometimes conceded to pros like Jonson.

He carried the blanket into the living room, where Arnett was curled up on the long sofa. He laid the coverlet on the old man, whispering the embroidered chant:

The faery-beam upon you, the stars to glister on you
A moon of light
In the noon of night
'Till the fire-drake hath o'ergone you!

F.A. PALENQUE : JULY 28:

The wind is hissing through the palms this evening, howler monkeys hooting on the vines. We have unanimously decided to keep the netting closed, the bats being quite persistent. As I reminded them, the Zotzilana Chimalman, the Bat God, is a nagual, a sorcerer of the Underworld.

Simmons just does not see the magnitude of the situation here. All these years and he has become a pencil-toting, mindless pack horse. I expected more help from him, but I don't need it now. We've lost Millar, she left a few days ago. Corinda, too, does not wish to cooperate. All this debating! Simmons definitely in the way here.

Had to replenish supplies recently, meal, maize, etc. They do not like to prepare the food with the old tools,

but I insist, as it will give them a better idea of how things were done. The zea mays, Indian corn, we soak in lime water then grind on a metate with a mano, until we have a paste. We mix the paste with water to make the pozole, which we then fry on a griddle. The first time we did this, York, the temporary graduate help we have, scratched his Californian head and exclaimed, "Oh, you mean tortillas!"

I envision the site as it must have been, the magnificent roof-combed temples, the sacbeob, the ball court - I wonder when we will get to that, it is considerably smaller than the Great Ball Court at Chichen Itza, but might as well be as formidable for all we've been able to do on it. We are, at least, finding out more about the ruling deities of Palenque, much information about the Smoking God "K" and his relation to the Jester God.

What's wrong with Simmons? I told him to leave, that I didn't need him anymore. I told them all to leave. He keeps a steady watch on all my activities. I managed to obtain some honey liquor and got him drunk, Simmons drunk on balche! It allowed me the time I needed.

The Jester God. Alexander's eyes felt like vortices, painfully spiralling, screwing into him like floodlights, making him remember coloured stars behind pressed eyes fist-squeezed tears knotted foreheads every squinted gaze at thin ice or beaded dew every puzzled glance into faces he'd loved. Making him remember angles, lighting, tenses. How you hate dissention, father. How hard it is for you.

The small brown package looks harmless, menial, as it is handed to the man. Spectacles squint at the address, and the mouth at the edges turns down. He is sending me another, he thinks, and automatically holds the book as though he is weighing it.

It is placed on the desk, the spectacles removed and polished with a handkerchief. He knows his son's penmanship, the pen had been his own until he had mistakenly given it to the boy.

It will sit there, will it? I will have this sitting on my desk and I will not open it? The book slips out one end, reaches the desk upside down, and I am staring at the determined face of my son, his black and white eyes staring back from a clearing on a mountain on the dust jacket on the desk.

It is called Closet Humour, it is a collection of short stories. There are words of dedication to Ruth, and there are ink scrawls from my pen: "Father - my archaeology - Sandor." I close the book, tap, tap on the desk this volume, invisible dents into the face of the author.

It is not a question of forgiveness, or, as my son has foolishly suggested, pride. Surely there is pride involved, but if a man doesn't have self-respect, well, how am I to deal with it? To give up what would have been a successful career, I would have seen to that, for what - these "collections" - bitter jealousy toward his family in Centipede, and now this God knows what blaspheming! "For Ruth" - Ruth, whom he will not marry, who works while he writes this drivel? It is disgraceful. Who had the nerve to say...how dare he?

"Father, I wish you'd at least try to see my point on this..."

Point? A point in the pointless life of Alexander Aurelie!

"Oh, of course, all the time and money you've..."

That's not it, Sandor, you know better.

"...a failure, yes, I see...disgrace, uhm..."

Purely in the eyes of the beholder, son. Disgrace is such a clinical word. I'm sure that with your great desire to grope for words you can invent something more appropriate.

"Ah, you just aren't listening!"

Picking up my globe from the desk.

"Your planet is covered with dust, Frederick Aurelie. You can't even read the names anymore because of the goddamn dust."

Tossing my property in the air as he leaves, as my son leaves.

F.A. PALENQUE : JULY 29:

It is as León-Portilla says:

"Kinh is a cosmic atmosphere with visages of the gods who become manifest cycle after cycle. From the beginning of the Classic period the sages discovered units of measurement which encompassed the great ages through which the world and humanity have existed. Space and time were inseparable. The spatial universe was an immense stage on which the divine faces and forces were oriented, coming and going in unbroken order."

My world of order. Continuity.

Alexander stumbled up the stairs while Arnett dreamed in the living room. On the landing, the searchlight at the window. The beam was trained by Vaudeville now, but he could still remember. "The faery-beam upon you," he said aloud, and pushed his face up against the cold pane. We're always fighting tenses,

Frederick, and yet, are we so different? Taking flesh and breathing moments just to strip them to the bone.

He lay on the bed, propped up with pillows, looking down at his naked body. His penis looked like the ash on the end of a cigarette, he thought, as a demure giggle escaped from Venus, and the cold Martian star deadpanned something about burnt out ends. He was beginning to sleep with his eyes open.

The woman They have placed beside him in the bed turns toward him, slips her hand between his legs, her brown-pink tongue lapping at his mouth. He feels cradled by this woman, or caged, he feels her breasts up against him, the silence of everything but her breathing in his ears. Static at his groin is nervous twitch as he desperately gropes at her nipples, not to look at the face, not to see it changing, neck veins protruding, skull exaggerating bone structure, not to feel himself sliding into a Vaudevillian. The deranged Acrobats screech and howl, butting out invisible cigarettes in the air, falling on one another in grotesque embraces. One of them wags a magic wand, says the right words, and Alexander explodes in his own applause. Darkness. An eye looks elsewhere, the spotlight dims.

They are bored with him now and are performing their own material, cavorting in the vibrating air, reverberating in the inner ear. The theatre is empty, rats nibbling on the sticky popcorn and half-sucked candy strewn about the floor. The dusty velvet

curtains hang heavy from the ceiling, and to the right and halfway up the aisle, he stands in his father's clothes.

Bumped at the elbow, he turns on the mask, stares hard into this indented illicit face, while in his ears the sound of air being blown into an empty Coke bottle. He watches the complicated face, shape devouring shape, spitting throbbing curving forms at the mouth. "I am not the only one who knows!" he yells. "They've given some of you names!" He points at the short, awkward body retreating up the aisle. "You they call the Jester God!"

On stage They laugh and snort, tears streaming down their greased faces.

I STAND IN THE SHADOWS NOW. I AM WATCHING YOUR ACT.

To wake up to the black outline was startling, and he wondered how she did it, but the outline wasn't her, was just the clothing.

"Alexander," she jostled him, scratching his arm in the process, payment no doubt for some indignity at his hand many years before.

"Alexander!"

His eyeballs clicked together and focussed on her face.

"Alfie," he mumbled, embarrassingly covering the body she had already covered.

"Who was that horrible little man downstairs?" she shuddered,

penumbra wiggling.

"Oh...ya," he yanked at a pillow that had fallen asleep under him, "is he still here?"

She shook her head, licking up a letter off each shoulder and forming the word NO.

"That's Arnett."

"Filthy grubby man."

"No, soldier in the First War. Hero, Alfie."

Then she was downstairs in the kitchen spitting high-element eggs up at him as he searched the room for clothes. He saw his father's shirt swallowing the doorknob, and remembered the notes in the kitchen. She mustn't read, not until he'd figured out what was going on.

He ran downstairs, and paused at the kitchen entrance as he saw Sister Rosa Blanca hovering beside the table. The eggs were eating themselves up in the pan, he turned off the heat and removed the pan from the burner. "Alfie," he put a hand on her back, feeling only the material.

And in the black immediate he is standing again in their snowworld. Red and white braided cord twisted frozen onto the blue mittens. Eyes peering out from beneath scarves and touques, muffled shrieks as the three bodies grapple with the heavy wooden toboggan, neck veins bulging as they drag it up the mountain. And it is squash and squash as he becomes riveted to the cold seat, legs yanked forward and held in place by other arms and legs.

"Hold on. Hold on tight!" He clings to the melton cloth in front of him, scrunching the centipede close, plunging as one into the freeze of diamond shards.

Sister Rosa Blanca looked at him with her veiled face.

"Alfie, I'm going through the notes. I wish you'd leave them."

"Alex, what are these scribbles, these little drawings here..."

He pulled the notebook from her hands. Curious nun, wondering, pulling back. "Alex! He's my father too. I just want to see Daddy's writing..." Her voice trailed off and they looked at each other strangely at the sound of the word.

"What did you come here for, Alfie? Why didn't you call?"

He tried to sound casual, but noticed his arm held out between his sister and the other notes on the table.

She was looking at him for what seemed a long time, but was actually only long enough for her to release the notebook. "I did call, but I could never get through." They both surveyed the kitchen phone, in limbo, its cord removed from the wall jack. "I wanted to know how you were doing, you haven't called either Horace or myself. He suggested I drop in and see...and I find you here with father's clothing all everywhere, a derelict in the living room, and..."

The time he wandered past his parents' room in the middle of the day and saw Alfie standing before his mother's mirror, her stringy brown hair looped up behind her head, her cheeks and

lips resplendently red, dark eyes peering out. Alfie in mother's slip, the front of it hanging down, and in place of mother's softness two hard looking little nubs and bony ribs jutting out further, as she stared. A puzzled look on the face in the glass, she tried smiling a long, toothy smile, like a silent movie lady, then her lips settled back into the straight line. She didn't see him at the door. He was going to butt in and laugh at her, she looked so silly there, but her twelve year old face was so dejected he felt embarrassed for her.

Alexander looked at Alfreda. He held her shoulders, fragile under the habit, and, surprising to both people, hugged her quickly. "You go back now, Alfie."

The brief physical contact sent a blush up Sister Rosa Blanca's face. He let her out the kitchen door and turned to face the shot-out eyes of eggs.

A close call, Frederick, how many have you had. She is like you, you know, a purist. I am the outsider. But you have taught me patience, how to crouch quiet and let the animal reveal itself, how to sit still as layer upon layer of strata is uncovered. I can wait for you, Frederick Aurelie.

Frederick pulled a canutillo out of his pocket and stuffed it with picietl, a habit known to the gods and pleasing to the archaeologist. He inhaled and felt the tobacco wafting into his lungs. He shaded his eyes with one hand and looked over at the man and two women meticulously scraping away soil and marking the

strata with wedges. The man wore khaki shorts and went bare-chested, the women in similar shorts and thin loose cotton shirts that nonetheless clung to their breasts because they were drenched in sweat.

Frederick found himself marvelling at their efficiency and dedication. The straw and cotton hats were little screen against the sun yet these young people persisted, lovingly exercising their patience. His own ability to control enthusiasm in the face of professional precision had been harder won.

The team works hard under this sun, in this air so heavy and intoxicating that the day will pass in a liquid haze. Frederick lifts the band of his wrist watch, but the skin underneath remains damp. On an impulse, he takes off the watch and slips it into his pocket. He scans the jungle, the corozo palms and ceiba trees sturdy like the strong limbs of his workers, helpers he will soon be losing.

I wipe my head with a handkerchief as I climb the tower of the Palace. From here I can see the site proper. I pull my notebook out of the shoulder sack, enter references to Corinda's vampire bat problems, the macaw that is fast becoming a mascot, and the trouble I am having with Simmons. And in the margin I draw an orchid, my favourite flower.

II Marshmallow

F.A. PALENQUE : THE SOLAR CALENDAR:

Relating to the 360 degrees of a circle, the Mayan year had 360 days, the tun being divided into eighteen twenty-day "months." The extra five days were known as Uayeb, or, the unlucky days.

Staccato thumping at the front of the house. In the kitchen with the journals, he could hear what sounded like feet tapping against the base of the door, fingers drumming against the glass at the top of the door. Something was pounding like a mano on a metate. How dare they disturb me, he thought, lifting his long spine out of the chair. They know better than to bother me while I am at work.

The cold air entered as soon as he opened the door, and he found himself staring at the young, haggard face. She had clear grey eyes and was very pale despite the chill, her light brown hair escaping from the ponytail and forming a fringe around her face.

"Hello," she said, "may I come in?"

She looked very tired. He imagined she looked the way he felt. She might have been nineteen or in her mid-twenties, it was difficult to tell with her so distended, slumping on the suitcase. Suitcase?

"May...may I come in, please?"

"Come in...yes...but...well, yes, come in."

He led her into the kitchen. It took what seemed to be all her energy to make the trip from the suitcase to the first chair in sight. She sat down and proceeded to sneeze, pleading for a kleenex. He hastened over to the counter and donated five multicoloured kleenex to the cause.

The girl looked at him for a long time. It wasn't an official stare because her eyes travelled the length of his body with an objective, yet curious, squint. "Well," she said finally, "who are you?"

He coughed in disbelief and whirled around. This was the family kitchen, his papers covering the table, his half-eaten sandwich and curdling glass of milk beside the sink. Yes, he had a right to ask. "Uh...pardon me, but would you mind telling me who you are?"

She looked momentarily disoriented, just a flash. Her legs straddled the base of the chair; the protuberance was impossible for either of them to ignore as she arched herself awkwardly in the chair.

"I'm nearly due," she said carefully, as though to say it recklessly would induce labour. "I really could use a glass of milk, not that I like it or anything, but..." She eyed her roundness.

"Uh, I'm sorry, I...it went sour," he said, looking stage-left and right for some hints from the prompters in the wings. "Look... who are you?"

It was embarrassing to snap the pencil like that, he wished he hadn't done it.

"Don't you find it cold?" she commented.

"Eh?"

"I said, don't you find it cold, you know, going around half-dressed?"

Alexander noticed the shirt and pants slung over the back of the third chair. He could not remember taking them off. He noticed his shorts clinging mercifully and essentially to his frame; Wimpdom Symptom, scuffling into clothes in front of this all-too-knowing woman.

"Name's Marsha Millar," she said, "or, as my last boss, Giorgio Cara used to call me...Marsha-mallow," she surveyed her bulge.

He knew the name. It couldn't be, yet, it had to be. "Who else?" he said.

She looked at him, for the first time with some apprehension. "You never said who you were."

He paced the room in his bare feet, skidding painfully on one half of the broken pencil. "I'm Alexander," he tested her. A look passed over her face but it was not one of recognition. He finished buttoning his shirt, staring at her. She was decidedly unnerved and heaved her body alert.

"I can't have made a mistake...surely...who are you?"

"Alexander...Aurelie."

She closed her eyes and slowly pushed her hand through her hair. "Aurelie," she said, exhausted.

Making her comfortable on the couch was not as simple as he had anticipated, and she struggled clumsily until she pulled her feet up and covered the beachballish shape with Arnett's blanket. Alexander brought in the hastily prepared tea; it was not exactly hot, but it would have to do.

"Thanks," she said, taking it from him, her face relaxing into its twenty-six or so years.

He could not wait any longer. "You are Millar, from the research team?"

She nodded, sipping the tea. "Yes. I left before the others did, though...are you a cousin, or..."

Alexander frowned. "I am his son."

She shrugged in confusion. "Oh...I'm sorry. I knew there was a son, though he had a different name, something Classical, Virgil, or Horace..."

"Harry."

"Oh. Sorry. Frederick did mention the family, I don't know..."

"I do," he snapped. Frederick's selective history. "I take it you heard about my father?"

She took long breaths between sips of tea. "Yes, I know. I found it hard to get information, though; the explanations weren't too extensive in the States."

He was pleased she wasn't offering the obligatory condolences.

"I wanted to talk to Simmons," she said. "Have you seen him yet?"

Alexander jackknifed the conversation. He had to find out if she knew anything first. "Is that why you've come, Marsha? You know, you shouldn't be travelling in your condition."

At the mention of her condition she once more became preoccupied with it, and gave way to exhaustion. He decided to let her rest. "Upstairs." he added quickly, "you'll be more comfortable upstairs, there are spare bedrooms, bathroom, do you think you can take the stairs, Marsha?" Alexander could not run the risk of her straying back into the kitchen, now that he knew who she was.

He settled her into Alfreda's room, and went back into the kitchen. He spent a long time studying the rhizome motif on the Temple of the Foliated Cross, tracing it with his finger. Alexander had read how the lotus was becoming even more important than his father's generation of archaeologists had postulated. The archaeological guns were now speculating that the lotus flower was used to fertilize an elaborate system of raised cornfields. This new theory was rapidly making the slash-and-burn theory of farming, at best, inadequate. His father would have known a lot about it, perhaps Marsha.

So Vaudeville's sending in sidekicks, eh? A honey at that. What's her hidden talent, being sawed in half and pulling out a beachball? Beats a rabbit...

She was on the research team, she knew Frederick Aurelie, she had

shown up at his house pregnant. Alexander frowned and sang softly to himself:

If you knew Frederick
Like I knew Frederick,
Oh, oh, oh what a scowl...

For a moment he thought of his father on stage with Marsha, muscle tumbling contraction groaning, smiling and bowing as the girl's stomach begins to inflate. Alexander rattled his head and shook off the thought.

F.A. PALENQUE :

Re.: Tobacco

Considered to be a defense against evil supernatural forces. Tobacco was used in barter, as a sacrifice to the gods, as a medicine. The Mayans considered ailments to be caused by malevolent powers. The tamcaz was an evil force within the person, causing the person spasms and shock. Other diseases were caused by sorcerers and various personifications of evil outside the person. Tobacco protects.

I will smoke some tobacco as Palenque waits for dusk.

For the next few days, Alexander did nothing but tend the Marshmallow. She seemed capable of consuming inordinately large amounts of food, even if she was, as she reminded him, eating for two. Twice he went out and bought milk from the nearby grocers only to have it pronounced sour upon arrival, the thick lumps sliding down the stainless steel sink and into the drain.

He needed to learn what she knew, yet she seemed unprepared

to divulge anything until she was "comfortable." Alexander was sure she had learned the word on an airline. "Comfort" included a perpetually hot hot-water bottle, perpetually lukewarm milk, and enough wool to knit "cozies" for every cold thing in the house. He didn't want to admit failure at human contact so soon, but he had to admit that this half of the species was becoming increasingly alien to him. He thought of the various women he'd been involved with over the years. Ruth was unfathomable, he'd admit to that. But she had never knit toe-socks.

At one point he was leaning beside Marsha to place the plate of creamed chicken on the night table, and she took a whiff of the arm of his shirt.

"Frederick's, isn't it?"

This unnerved him. He couldn't very well wear the funeral-suit every day, it would be playing stand-up to Them, and propriety now insisted he wear something. "So why don't you knit me some long johns?"

"Wool knickers?" she drawled. "You are wierd."

Never mention of a husband, boyfriend, or concerned pedestrian responsible for this beachball. No mention of how long she intended to stay. Were he not so curious as to what she might know, and so oddly affected by his mother's samplers in the hallway, he would have signalled for the hook.

As it was, he had not been able even to look at the notes since

she'd arrived. He was too busy shopping for Beehive Baby Yarn, looking all too much the guilty drone, standing in line avoiding the matronly eyes of sales personnel.

"What are you hoping for?" a mustached woman asked, herself grappling with a pyramid of yarn atop a sunken beachball. He liked the haphazard geometry of colours.

"Marshmallow," he said, trying to focus on a slender woman in the adjoining lingerie section who was debating burgundy lace.

Not once had she asked him what he did for a living before being promoted to peon. He was not idealistic enough to assume she knew he wrote books. The fact that he could read books would not have affected the situation. He supposed he could tell her about the singing telegram job, and leave it at that.

"Lying in" - what a lovely term. Our ancestors made such dubious phrases both proper and acceptable. Marshmallow referred to it as "my lyin' in", which caused Alexander to grin because he realized he'd been humming the Cowardly Lion theme.

It was after she said that the rice pudding tasted like fingernails that he decided she was comfortable enough. "Marsha, you were with my father...what happened?"

She looked jittery. Wimpdom Symptom.

"You...you're the only one I can talk to about this...see, my father and I were not very close. We didn't agree on a lot of things and, well, I'm just trying to set my mind straight, you understand..."

She understood that she had asked for unsalted crackers.
Too much salt was not good for the baby.

"Okay, I'm sorry...what do you want me to do, lick the salt off them?" He might have been suggesting something indecent the way she glared. "Look, can't you understand how this might be important to me?"

He paced the room, skimming along the wall and crackling the long dead palm branch wedged behind a picture of the Sacred Heart. This woman! In Alfie's bed with her goddamn wool and her Immaculate Conception. Jet-puffed, no doubt!

"I just wish you'd be a little more considerate, Alexander. After all, I am nearly due."

He remembered all the marshmallows he had toasted over all the fires in all the summer camps he was shuffled off to as a child. How the outside would crystallize, turn dark and fall away, the inside warm, soft and pure.

"Listen kid," he spoke to the beachball, "could you please explain to your mama here how I might want to know something about my papa?" He could see the beachball grinning under the flannel nightgown. It was odd how all the burgundy lace women of the world always walked right past you and into their dressing rooms.

Marsha had taken over the second floor. From the kitchen he could hear her padding up and down overhead. Incredible to think that from these slow, hefting motions, these broom noises, would

emerge the pitter-patter of little feet. A beachball with feet.

A rooted Vaudevillian with a mushroom plastic scent.

He was on his way to the bathroom when he glanced into Alfreda's room. Marsha was not in bed, the door to the bathroom was open and the light off. Where could she, Alexander poked his head inside Alfreda's bedroom.

Marsha was naked, standing sideways before the mirror, her hands on her stomach. In the yellow lamplight she looked almost translucent, blue green of veiny skin and blue white of bony face. Her hair in a ponytail down her back. Alexander could see that, were it not for the absurd beachball, she would be quite thin. The pregnancy had added little weight to her thighs and buttocks, no, the beachball was definitely a beachball. She turned suddenly.

"Y...you! How...could you at least knock first?" Hopeless attempt to cover the mound with a throw cushion. He remembered his similar scrambling when they'd met. A Wimpdom Symptom in common.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wondered where you were."

She stood there, blue corduroy cushion in front of her stomach, one breast jutting out from behind it. Her breast looked translucent as well. She was frightened, there, in the nun's room.

Alexander handed her a blanket. "I am sorry, Marsha."

She was still flustered. "Well, it's a bit...I mean, it's a bit presumptuous, who are you to..."

"You're right, Marsha. I could be anybody. Did you ever once

think of that before you came into this house?"

She bristled. "Person could be...I mean, well, I guess you can't assume that people are all the same. Your father..."

"No! You can't assume that, Marsha. I could be anybody standing here staring at you," he fired back.

She pouted arrogantly, nervously. "But you're not anybody," and pulled the blanket around her shoulders. "You're Frederick's son."

Translucent Woman with Beachball, Opus 26. He shook his head. "No need to be redundant, dear." He gave her ponytail a flick with his hand.

"Could be anybody," she muttered to herself, turning from the mirror.

He was worried that she would ask about the paperwork spread out in the kitchen, so he gathered it up and reluctantly walked down the hallway. He stopped in the living room to grab the blanket and threw it over his shoulder, the chant trailing after him along the floor.

He would have had to go in there eventually, it contained a comprehensive library; he would have had to. The door cracked and groaned, the air a stronger scent than his own. Here it had always frightened him, here, with the books that ate their own guts out... in with the stories of Mexico where nothing was safe; the liquor had worms in it, or frogs, the priests carried knives.

This was a cold room, when it should not be. Dry cold, like the

ice the storage trucks carried, solid carbon-dioxide that wasn't solid, ice that was not ice. As a child, fascinated by the block of steamy ice the driver had thrown onto the pavement.

"Steam ice!" shrieking hoarsely and crouching beside it, eyes wide and unblinking. "Harry, Harry, look!" Sitting on his mitt and letting the ball roll into the sewer.

"Ah, it's just dry ice...Jesus, Alex, you let the ball go..." Horace kicking the ice in anger. Alexander following it and plunking himself down beside it.

"Hey...oh Christ, Alex, what a fool...don't touch it, you'll burn yourself. What a turdhead you are sometimes."

"But it was ice...", sputtering all the way home.

This room had no windows. That had never occurred to him except in relation to the lightning. Fluorescent lights, high powered study lamps, yellow, purple, white. But when the summer storms came and the power went off, Alexander watched at the upstairs window, mesmerized by the fissures of light and the slow revolving searchlight, while in the study below his father sat impatiently in the dark. Taking his place at the desk, Alexander shivered slightly as he lowered himself into the chair.

F.A. PALENQUE : JULY 30:

I have dismissed York and Corinda, they left three days ago. Simmons is the only one still here. I have been pacing the sacbeob, these processional walkways, needlessly. What must be done, I know what must be done. Simmons talks like a man with his head in the ground. I have seen too much

of what is out there, too much of what is here, to be dissuaded. The Mayans deform the skull externally, yet Simmons is suffering from internal skull deformation - they all are.

It is so difficult to remain calm. I take and twirl this orchid between my fingers, marvel at the intricate world turning inside. The Matapalo grows successfully here, this is a place for such things. I wonder what will become of them, all these people who have flitted around the perimeters of my world, turning as this flower turns, dropping as it drops.

Alexander cringed at the mention of Matapalo. He began searching, he did not know for what. This ominous feeling from the words of a dead man, it did not make sense, but that was not the framework. Frederick was writing more sparingly now, he must pick up on what he could. What was that group doing skeletal remains research on the peninsula? Alexander scanned shelf upon shelf, whole lives of dusty dedication, pondering oblivion.

He had found something that was relatively new. Alexander placed the book gingerly on the desk and hunched over it, reading T. Dale Stewart's article on human skeletal remains in the Maya region, while the odor of pipes and canutillos in the stand nearly gagged him.

...Throughout this description of deforming devices mention has been made of the pressure that had to be applied to the child's head to produce flattening. Obviously the results varied as the pressure varied; heavy pressure produced the most impressive results. When the devices were used with very little pressure there was the likelihood that the child could move its head and thereby produce an atypical deformation. This is probably the explanation of the specimens which are difficult to evaluate.

If the child moves its head...atypical deformation...he almost didn't hear the screams bouncing off the wall. Marshmallow. Running upstairs, knocking his mother's 'hour on the dial' sampler off the wall as he raced. He pushed open the door to the room. In the moonlight, Marsha on the bed, beachball exposed; Marsha in a contorted position, crying in her sleep.

If the child moves its head...perfected hollows...beachball. She looks absolutely helpless, he thought. "Hey kid, wake up," gently coaxing her back to consciousness. "It's okay, wake up."

She was all tears and sweating, opening her eyes slowly. "You?" She shook her head to jar herself back. "Aurelie?"

He pulled the blanket over her and sat on the edge of the bed. "Are you alright? How often do you get nightmares like that?"

She was still crying, her face squashed up and wringing wet. "You," she repeated, "I can't...I try not to fall asleep, but I drift off and..."

"Why don't you want to sleep, Marsha?"

He was holding her hand, small but not delicate. There was something inside her, under the round dome. She had something inside her. "Marsha, maybe I can do something," he tried, realizing how ineffectual he must look. "I get nightmares, too."

Somebody wedged a question mark between their glances.

She dozed off as he sat holding her hand, he scanning Alfreda's

room which probably had never experienced nightmares. The Sacred Heart, Virgin Mary, Mother of Perpetual Help, Saint Francis - the entourage that explained things to Alfreda. He envied her this assuredness; he envied her her night's sleep.

"I get nightmares too, Marsha," he whispered, amazed to find himself holding hands with a pregnant woman he was not even sure he liked. She had a calmness on her face now that he did like. Her grey eyes were closed, the frown on her forehead had subsided. It was a child's face when she was asleep. Perhaps he looked this way when he slept, but he doubted it. Ruth had told him he slept most of the time with his mouth open, like a crocodile waiting for a snack to wander in. Untimely tidbits, she said. In the middle of the night when Ruth had her back to him, he used to lie next to her, arch around her, pressing up against her contoured body; and for a few carefully choreographed moments their crescent bodies effortlessly accommodated one another.

Alexander looked at Marsha. This odd shaped woman, her skin stretched to accommodate another, this was new to him. He had been the baby, he could not remember his mother so close to it like this. And then Ruth thought she was and then she wasn't, or wouldn't, he never did find out. He remembered asking his mother how God knew a couple was married, in order to send the baby. Mother reminding him that God knew everything.

Everything. Mad! Deranged Vaudevillians - sure, throw in another ball, see how many we can juggle here! Throw a beachball

at a woman who catches it like a medicine ball. Bend little skulls, fuck up fontanelles, for what? Squatter Gods - teased, appeased, and sometimes close to pleased. Sure, I know, I know, you've got a million of 'em.

Beam turns, an eye blinks. They see him with this woman, and he has arched around her. They are watching him tonight, and who is this pale woman? No one, he is yelling, blowing noisemakers, tap dancing, holding one side of his frock coat round her shoulder as They stare. She's a beachball, she's a hoofer, as They speculate yet further; have They seen her here before, sometime, with someone else, it seems? The skin on Alexander's face stretched taut, as did the bony grip on Marsha's hand.

He did not know how long he slept like this, collapsed atop his own hand which remained asleep after he awoke. In the half-light he could see her dromedary shape, ancient, enormous, silhouetted against the lace curtains of the horizon. He thought of the last woman he had slept with. That government employee someone had introduced him to. Cassandra? Krista? A woman with a rude overbite and a penchant for wild cherry Chiclets.

This woman, breathing heavily now, 'breathing for two', having a satisfying relationship with the air she was breathing in and gulping down. Not feminine, no burgundy lace, but decidedly female here in her flannel nightgown, female in a way that made him want to check for dust under the bed, on his clothing, on his body.

Awkward to feel awkward again.

Perhaps the baby would not be a Vaudevillian. They might not have noticed Marsha, especially due to the bright colours she wore - They might have thought it was a beachball!

"Hide behind bright colours, Marsha," he whispered, "when you have the baby, don't let Them know. Guard the Empty Space...I'll help you." He worked his wrist back and forth to increase circulation. Perhaps she really didn't know anything. Frederick Aurelie's erratic notes mentioned no confidant, and Simmons was the point of contention. Marsha said she wanted to see Simmons. She stirred beside Alexander and moved her head until it faced him.

"Hello," she said, looking puzzled, Alexander doing wrist exercises in her bed at dawn.

"Morning," he informed her, focussing on the sleep and crystallized tears in her eyes.

She shifted her body up, and he positioned a pillow at her back. She smiled weakly, tapping his hand which had begun to awaken.

"Thanks," she said. "I mean, for last night. Did you sleep here?"

He nodded. Thinking the Vaudevillians might be listening, he reached over and held her romantically. "It was nothing, dear. You were wonderful, too. After all..." And he began to sing loudly:

When you're with a pistol you sparkle like a crystal
Yes, you blaze like the morning sun...
...but you can't shoot a male in the tail like a quail
Oh, you can't get a man with a gun...

His eyes darted around the room. He needed to talk to her alone. She watched him, her eyes getting rounder. He yanked the covers up from the bed and pulled them around himself and Marsha, all the time singing in his telegram voice:

If you shoot a rabbit, some furrier would grab it
For a coat that would warm someone.
But you can't shoot a lover, and use him for a cover
Oh, you can't get a man with a gun...

He pulled the blankets over their heads. He could feel her next to him, her breathing loud and baffled.

"Alexander, what are you doing?" she whispered.

They were in a tent now, his head the apex. How appropriate, he thought, outwit Them by making your own circus.

"Marsha, I don't know why you've been having nightmares, but you must see Simmons." Should he trust her with anything? Shit, he didn't know anything!

"Alexander, I can't breathe...Alexander?"

He reluctantly allowed the covers to slip from the top of his head. "Matapalo!" he said suddenly, watching her sleep-sequestered eyes.

The lashes flitted quickly, but the mouth answered calmly, "What was that?"

"Matapalo!" he repeated, watching her whole face.

"A flower," she said uneasily, "Frederick's flower."

"What do you mean, Frederick's flower?"

"I mean...your father liked the clusia. He went for long walks to find the blossoms; we worried, sometimes, that he'd get lost in the jungle. Even the most experienced people have to be careful. The early explorers totally missed Palenque. Check an older map, check Catherwood's from 1841 or so. No mention of Palenque, only the written comment, 'Places said to be thinly inhabited.'"

"So Frederick went off a lot by himself?"

She shrugged. "He headed the team. He had to organize, survey. He and Simmons did that while we worked on the established digs."

"Did he find them?"

"What?"

"Did my father find the Matapalo?"

She drew the covers around herself. "They're not always easy to find. The plant itself is large, but you can miss the blossoms, it's so overgrown in the jungle. Sometimes he'd come back with one; most often, he wouldn't."

"Marsha, what does Matapalo mean?"

She knotted her forehead and pushed her skull into the pillow.

"Kill-tree," she said.

He helped her into the taxi, easing her bulk into the back seat,

getting in on the other side. The driver glanced apprehensively at Alexander and revved his motor. "Oui, monsieur?" the man said.

"À l'hôpital Royale Victoria, s'il vous plait."

The driver nodded and slammed his foot on the gas, the car sped around corners and down the hilly streets. Alexander noticed that Marsha was looking worried. He took her hand; it had worked once. "It'll be alright," he said, and let go of her hand. It didn't work this time.

The driver was weaving in and out of lanes, and as Alexander looked out he noticed that they had run a red light. "What the hell..." he muttered.

"He thinks it's time," she said, "you know, me."

Oh no, this was ridiculous. This was bloody dangerous.

Uh...monsieur...monsieur...elle n'est pas ma femme; vous avez faites une erreur."

The driver shot Alexander an indignant glance in the rearview mirror. "Pense que c'est toi qui fais l'erreur."

"What did he say?" Marsha asked, drawing nervous initials on her stomach with her finger.

Well, it was somebody's mistake, Alexander thought. "Something about Squatters' Rights," he said to her.

He could not chance going up there again, someone would be sure to spot him. But he had to go, how did he know what she'd ask him? He had to take the chance.

"Come on, darling," he said to Marsha, putting one arm protectively around her shoulder, patting the pastel green bulge. "Come along, dear," he declared loudly, moving to the elevator. Hide behind bright colours, he nodded to himself, smiling at people in the elevator.

"Marsha, there's something strange with Simmons."

"What do you mean?"

"Just follow my lead, okay?"

"Immediate family?" the nurse asked, smiling at the green rotundity that blossomed forth from the loving couple.

Different nurse, different story.

"No," Marsha said, before he could stop her. "No, I'm..."

"We're very good friends of his," Alexander skidded in, "very."

The nurse ignored Alexander, obviously the proposed planter in this greenhouse, and spoke to Marsha. "You're friends of his? That's good. I'm sure he'd be glad to see you." She nodded approbation at the beachball. Pediatric nurse, filling in for the day. "You must be quiet, however, he's still critical...truth is, I'd not let you in at all except I appreciate how difficult it is to come down here in your condition. Just keep it short. Remember, he's not out of the woods yet."

Nor am I, Alexander smiled inanely and put Marsha's elbow in a loving vice grip. "Ask him about Matapalo," he said, forgetting the saccharine smile sticking to his lips.

Marsha was peeking in and out of doors, looking for others of her ilk.

"Wrong floor," he suggested.

"What?"

"Wrong floor for plastic surgery," he poked the beachball.

They entered the room silently. Hospitals, like funeral parlours, saw to that. Good business for Vaudeville. Only the ineffectual squeaking of shoes and the unheeded moaning of sufferers disturbed the dull, white silence.

Alexander stood off to one side, the side with the eye bandage. The man was sleeping, limbs hanging in traction, a self-made hammock. Marsha sat in the visitor's chair and waited; the baby inside her stomach waited; in a vase on the night table three wilted roses, longing for traction, waited.

She was crying, crying or shaking, whispering to herself. "Eddie," she said to the bruised and bandaged man, and she touched the covers slightly.

Simmons' head began to turn toward her, the uncovered eye looking for a face. Then he recognized her and they shuddered together.

"Eddie," she said. "Oh God, Ed."

Alexander could not see Simmons' eye. What was it saying? Finally the mouth began to move.

"Millar," he said in a strained voice. "You?"

She nodded. "Oh God, I didn't think this would happen... Ed...oh, God." She looked angry. Her face became flushed, opaque, she was no longer translucent. "Hun yah ual cab," she spat out. "Hun yah ual anomob!"

He was responding with high-pitched whimperings that caught in his throat and emerged as hiccups. "Ah pul anat, ah pul anat mo," he shook. "So deep...no one would find us, no one would know. Safe, to prepare new world, said, new world..." He rolled his head on the pillow.

She was holding Simmons by the bandages, they were bandaged together, it seemed. Alexander was fascinated by the intensity of Marsha's face as she spoke to the man. "It's over, Ed," her voice became faint. "Hun yah ual cab...it's over now. Everything, everything gone." She began sobbing, touched his wrapped head and planted a hasty kiss on the bandages. She began to move away.

Simmons called out, "Matapalo!" Marsha stood completely still. He called out, "Hol-can-be," and Marsha hesitantly returned to the bedside. They were whispering together, Alexander couldn't hear them, Simmons said something to her and she was backing away, shaking her head, looking at Alexander with terrified eyes, sputtering, pointing at Simmons.

Marsha led Alexander by the arm and pulled him out of the room, her other hand clamped on her stomach. She was so odd, dragging him, yet looking as though she were about to collapse.

For a second Alexander thought of his father climbing atop this struggling girl with the stringy hair flapping, and the fear in those eyes mirrored her glance as they stood in the elevator. Father had not wanted children, their whinings and Wimpdom Symptoms got in the way of the work. Yet, Alexander studied the thin fingers grasping and molding the stomach.

Standing outside waiting for a taxi, she moved ever further away from him as he edged forward to touch her. They stood in the freezing rain, it dribbled off their faces, it rained on the child in Marsha's stomach. She stood opposite him as the hard pellets hit his face. He had to find out.

"What were you saying in there? What was that talk?"

She was rocking herself back and forth on toes and heels, arms clinging to herself. Alexander recognized the action.

"Marsha, what were you saying?"

The rain smacked her face and blended with the tears, it was difficult to tell which were which. "Simmons...said he killed your father," her voice expanded to encompass exhaustion, and she fell into the taxi, sodden clothes sticking to her body.

He was standing there peering through a drop entrapped in his lashes. This is Monet's eye, was all he could think of. Did Monet stand like this, see the world through trapped raindrops, reflecting translucent at the rims of his eyes?

Sitting in the back seat, he pulled out his pen, the dark blue

mottled casing and the gold trim. Rubbed it in his hands as if to make it thinner or perhaps to feel fingerprints so thinly pressed upon.

"He's crazy," she was saying, "crazy from the pain."

Alexander was trying to remember something, he was writing on his hand. "You are talking about Simmons?" he said from a great distance as the red from his pen-pricked hand made purple the blue ink.

Father's life - control, control had been everything. To remain part of the study. But things change. Father had studied and charted, mapped and postulated. But when he submerged himself into their world, he was a part of it; the communion with the lost faces and cobwebbed eyes. The hurried frenzied strokes on paper, files that were becoming more and more cryptic, the penmanship that fairly flew across the page, carrying with it the dust and blood of a private world. Had his father been a victim? Had Alexander been misreading the journals? He looked at his inked hand. My father does not know how to be a victim.

From the taxi he could hear the quenched streets hissing at him, or perhaps it was amateur stand-up night in Vod'Vil. Laughed offstage? Hoofing it frantically to the sound of your own voice as hurled grapefruits and rotting tomatoes remind you you're the representative of Carmen Mirandakind, with compost heap hair and vegetable history:

I'm just wild about Harry
 And he's just wild about me,
 Oh, I'm just wild about Harry
 And he's just wild about -
 Cannot do without -
 He's just wild about me...

Father killed? Harry and Alfie, how were they to...father was so precise in their minds, single-tensed and two-dimensional. To open up the other tenses now.

"It was when I was mentioning Freder... your father. He looked at me, angry, confused I think, he was looking at me with his one eye...Alexander, he was your father's friend. He couldn't have."

The taxi was approaching the stone lions he and Alan grew up with. He put his stained hand against the window as the car passed them. "The lions," he mumbled as he helped her from the car. He was walking her into the house when she said, "The Temple of the Lion."

"Eh?"

"Temple of the Lion, south of the Temple of the Sun. Hasn't had much done on it yet. It's on the edge of the site."

He didn't know why this should have surprised him. Of course he would be represented there, front row seat at the proceedings. "Temple of the Cowardly Lion," he corrected her.

F.A. PALENQUE : RE.: FRANZ BLOM, Tribes and Temples, 1926:

The first visit to Palenque is immediately impressive. When one has lived there for some time this ruined city becomes an obsession.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS : AUGUST 3:

Lord Shield Pacal is buried beneath the Temple of the Inscriptions in a.d. 683. His son, Chan-Bahlum, according to the Schele postulations, is buried beneath the Temple of the Cross. We do not know this as fact. Everyone guessing. The New Power, Chan-Bahlum, with stone tablets to commemorate, on the right panel, God "L" smoking a cigar: "It's a boy!" I will someday find Chan-Bahlum. I am looking for the son.

Who are your gods, Frederick Aurelie? Why have you gone so far away? Alexander's skull was resting on the notebooks, the study lamp lighting his nose, pressing light in through his closed eyes.

And he is little, coming home at dusk, bolting in the door nose running corduroy knees flapping water pistol hanging out of jacket pocket. He doesn't see and collides with his father; stunned by the sudden contact, backs away slowly. Father resets the glasses which have slid sideways on his nose. Holds out his hand, but the boy shrinks from it.

"Come," says his father's dry dusty voice.

The boy nervously following into the study. Room is dark except for the lamp which lights up the precise area of desk. His father is smiling again, but in the uneven light displaying caverns from two missing teeth on the right side of the upper jaw, hollows in his cheeks - the man frightens the boy.

"Come," says the ancient voice. The man pulls the boy

gently until he is standing beside the desk. "You will see, Sandor." Father opens the center drawer and begins taking out lumps of clay, pieces of a puzzle. The man lays them on the table and looks at them for a long time. Then he picks one up and begins rubbing it. "Feel this, Sandor," and passes a piece to the boy. It is cold and reddish-brown. "Rub it!"

The boy moves it around in his hand. Tiny particles, flecks appearing inside the whorls of his fingers. Then the dust is gone and there is smoothness. His father is taking three pieces and placing them together on the desk. They fit perfectly. "You see?" the man asks. The boy shudders as his father's hand briefly touches his shoulder blade. "You understand?"

"Yes, sir," the boy says, his hands behind his back. He wants to understand.

His father nods his head, hollow face looking tired. "Poor boy," the man says, "yet, you are the only one. You are the only one..." The man's eyes like dusty marbles. "The earth is flat and four-cornered, Sandor."

"No it isn't..."

"Silence!" the voice grows louder. "The earth is held up at the ends by the Four Bacabs, and each corner has its own colour. In the East...red," the man begins walking around the room, barely touching the spines of books with his fingers. "To the North... white; in the South...yellow," his father whirls around. "To the West...black!"

The boy is shivering in the cold room. He looks at the man, then at the picture on the desk of the man and his wife; the dead wife, the dead mother.

"But what holds up the sky, Sandor?" the man questions him.

The boy attempts an answer, something his mother had taught him. "God..."

"Thousands of Gods, boy! The sky is held up by trees! Trees of different colours and types. In the center, the ceiba tree."

"Like a tent pole?" the boy tries.

"Exactly." The man approaches the boy and holds his shoulders roughly. "Remember Sandor, there are thirteen layers of heaven... and there nine layers of hell!"

Nine hells, nine hells, and how deeply do we whirl in this silence coming down. In my sleep I have been sweating and the ink scrawls on the paper have combined with my own juices and have tattooed me forever. Forever, Frederick Aurelie, do you know about forever? Are you smirking where you're hiding, are you computing the time? Do you count now as the Mayans do - the dot, the bar, the shell? Try the Long Count, Frederick Aurelie; start from a particular day and move forward. We will meet here in Uayeb, in the five unlucky days.

The ceiba in the center and the sky balanced on top. And Chan-Bahlum, in the eight years from the death of Pacal to the dedication of the temples, what did he do in between? In between festivals, dedications, sacrifices. What do rulers do in their

spare time? What do the gods do? Boards riveted stiffly
across cradles so the children all grow up triangularly alike.
And the parrot, bird of the Underworld, only animal besides man
that can talk, what does it say? What it has been taught to say.

Bronze men squint eyes to the forest, vines of the forest.
In the heat, leaning against stones that leave grit and dust on
brown-gold skin, in the heat that twines and binds them to this
place, against these stones. The priests walk the sacbeob to the
temples of Gods. Sitting, hears sound of mano against metate,
zea mays pounded to meal - eat, praise to Gods, smoke, o Holy God,
o Zigar God, praise dust on feet skin sandal of skin, dust on
hands carve earplugs of jade, jewel, hand running length of
quetzal feather like small animal tickles palm of hand that moves
to forehead shades wandering eyes that watch the green border
of Palenque.

"Alex...Alexander!"

A cry from this woman, get into the clothes, wipe the words
from your face. Alexander ran upstairs, forgetting the clothes.

"What is it?"

Their eyes met in mutual horror.

"You...you're so white, Alexander," the voice barely escaping
her lips.

He was looking at her sweating face, her pain contorted face.

"You're hurting for two?"

Quick nods.

"Oh, good God Jesus, no...come on, Marsha...we were just at the hospital yesterday..."

"I know," she gasped, eyes closed in concentration. "Alex," through gritted teeth, "you have to help me."

"I'll get a taxi, Marsha. I'll call the hospital."

"Not for this kid," she seemed to say. "You must help."

Babies - small deformed heads with question-marked eyes, oh God, opening, closing, clicking... He watched her spasms helplessly. He tried holding her hand, she fought back with increasing force. "I can't...Marsha, I can't."

"Stop it. You hear me? Stop it!" Her eyes held fear, wonder, anger. She glared at him. "You have to, Aurelie."

"No...no warning, no warning, Marsha?"

"I called you, you didn't come. I don't want to do this lying down. Help me, set me up, Alexander," she motioned to the carpet. "Get a blanket."

Before he was aware of what he was doing, he was downstairs in the study grabbing the coverlet. There were blankets upstairs, the blankets were upstairs.

"Hello there, sonny."

Alexander jumped at the words. In the corner of the room Arnett was prying a book off the shelf. "Quite a library you got here." He gave up on the book and approached Alexander. "Hope you don't mind I wandered in. Truth is, I don't know too many people with nice homes...warm, y'know?" he chuckled at

Alexander. "Not as warm as you seem to think...why you goin' around naked?"

Shivers inside and outside coverlet on shoulders. "Arnett, having a baby upstairs!"

"Hooo...well, me. If I haven't gone and interrupted a mister-missus. I'm sorry, son, didn't know..."

"Look will you...she's due!"

The old man belched, eyes growing wide. "She's havin' it, now? Well come on, what ye standin' around scratchin' yer ass for? Go boil water, kid, it'll keep you busy." Arnett took off his loose coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves.

"What, you?"

"Delivered one over in France during the war. Get going!"

Arnett and Marsha were on the floor, the bed lamp shining slanted beams on the carpet, sponges and water ready.

"Arnett..."

"Take it easy, boy...come in slow and put the stuff down. Looks like it'll be a while yet."

He looked so calm, Alexander thought. Skin and sleeves rolled up, a stern gentleness as he murmured to Marsha. And she so strange in the lamplight; she was something frighteningly ancient, yet beautiful; Aurora with her Tithonus, the exquisite Immortal and her aging, decrepit lover.

"You're both so," he saw his nakedness, the straight lean body, "we're all so..." He smelled the odor of tobacco from somewhere.

Arnett was pushing the hair away from Marsha's face.

"Yer missus here," he said to Alexander, "she's one tough lady. Won't even lie down. Kinda prefers to squat like this, right honey?"

Alexander was looking at her sweating face. "Squatters' rights, Marsha," he said.

Arnett seemed to have a cramp in his arm and was also sweating profusely. The old man shot Alexander a glance. "Hey, kid, why don't you get that cloth over there, that's it... well, bring it over! For God's sake, where you been all yer life?" He turned his attention to Marsha. "Your first one, obviously. I had a son, y'know. Well, not me," he cackled. "I mean, my missus had the baby, but you might say I penetrated the phalanx. Y'know, she used to say that she never remembered it afterwards...the pain, I mean; she said it kinda fizzled away." He wiped her forehead and she smiled weakly at him.

"Your son," she said.

The old man watched her shivering stomach. "My boy," he said in a voice as quiet as hers. He shrugged. "He was always such a smart kid, always trying out this or that thing. Kinda like his old papa, I guess," he chuckled to himself. "And you can see where that got me." He grunted as Marsha shifted her weight, and surveyed his tattered skin and clothing. "He... always seemed to want to stuff so much into a day, like it was the

kind of race you run against yourself, you know, timing yourself - and he never seemed satisfied, never content..."

"Never complete," Alexander said, surprising himself at the words.

Arnett looked up with shiny eyes. "What's that you said?"

"What is your son doing now, Arnett?"

The old man shrugged again, squinting his eyes. "He died three days short of his nineteenth birthday, June, 1943. Air-gunner."

Arnett shook his head. "Never could tell him anything. Sure, I signed the paper that got him in at seventeen. I signed his death warrant."

He was staring at the window, not actually crying, ignoring his audience. He had played this out before, it seemed. "You can see the searchlight from here, eh?" he smiled slowly and intently.

"I used to watch it as a kid," Alexander said carefully.

"Sure, warn the aircraft there's a mountain smack dab in the center of the city...as if one mountain's gonna destroy 'em, heh," he was concentrating on the window now, "as if a lump of dirt can stop 'em." Glaring through eye slits.

Squinting was a sign of beauty among the Mayans; tying small ornaments in the hair to dangle before the eyes. A lump of dirt can stop them, Arnett. It stopped my father.

Arnett talked for what seemed a long time, Marsha punctuating the sentences with stabs and slashes of pain. Alexander drifted in and out of the monologue. Arnett keeps the boy safe and warm, he thought. More alive, perhaps, than the boy had ever been in life.

Most of Arnett's friends have been dead for over sixty years.
They keep the dead boy company.

"Hey kid," Arnett was saying, "how 'bout getting an old man
a drink...just one, mind you. 'Cause I get cold lookin' at ye,"
he snorted.

Alexander walked out of Alfreda's room. These people. Dead
fathers, dead sons, and an unknown, unborn baby. All these limbo
lives wandering around on the planet. No wonder we trip over
things.

He stopped by his bedroom and opened the closet door, pulling
on the pinstripe pants, studying the child drawing of Eyetooth,
the dog. "Still here too, Eyetooth?" he pondered. He saw himself
in the full-length mirror on the inside of the door. "Still here
too?"

Liquor. Perhaps Frederick hid it somewhere Alfreda wouldn't
look when she came in on a cleaning binge. The kitchen was out,
it belonged to Alfreda, colour-coordinated kleenex and 'Sacrifice
and Penance' salt and pepper shakers decorating the sideboard.
The living room was an abomination of the name, doilies settling
like synchronized dust on the headrests and arms of petrified
Victorian chairs.

Alexander nervously approached the study, singing haltingly
to himself:

I'm afraid there's no denyin'
I'm just a dandy-lion,
A fate I don't desoive...

You Sleazy Acrobats, always moving in. It isn't that simple, some people don't take well to squatters. After all, you weren't the only ones here. The Fifth Cycle begins August 11, 3114 B.C. The Long Count. Christian Time begins with the birth of Christ. Vaudeville Time - when does Vaudeville begin? Are you always lurking at the fringes? Every time Somebody's back is turned, you sneak in the exit door and set up stage. A God stoops to ponder his toenail, or glances off daydreaming, and you weasel your way in. And it isn't even all your doing!

We do it. We put you out of business, or some of you; good gods, bad gods, we do it all the time. By A.D. 1000 the Palenque Mayans have left their city for the jungle, turned away from the temples and shrines. Was this it? To put the gods out of jobs, was it bad; all you legions of deities with nothing to love, to hate, to amuse yourselves with. Is this where Vaudeville recruits?

The pages of his father on the desk, this haunting lonely room. And you, Frederick Aurelie. Cool and calculating, observing, charting. Only it wasn't possible, was it? It wasn't possible to sit back and watch it happening again and again, you had to put in your two cents' worth. Frederick Aurelie, master designer of the temporal realm, dressing in ritualistic garb this cultural phenomenon. Loincloths, mantas, deerskin sandals, jade, earplugs, shellfish dye, lava, shark teeth, tortoise shell, maize, tobacco, quetzal feathers.

Alexander looked for the liquor. He checked the small cabinet in the set of shelves closest to the desk and found a ceramic flask. Prying open the wooden stopper, he smelled the liquid. Thick, mead mixture - balche. Balche bark and honey made this intoxicating drink, the concoction his father had written he'd given Simmons. It had allowed him the time he needed. What had he needed time for? His father had always "needed time", it was a precious commodity like jade or quetzal feathers. He'd always needed a lot of things which others could not provide. Alexander had failed to satisfy a desire that burned somewhere in the back of his father's skull. He had not just failed the man's expectations, he had failed the man.

What unearthly thing must be done to have a human being turn away from you? His mother he had loved simply, purely. She had no power over him except that gentle allurements he still felt for a woman who would create chants against Vaudeville - a woman of adjacent fibre.

But the man. The man who stood with his back to you, looking toward the temples. Ruth had not liked him, the one time they'd met. She had said he seemed selfish and preoccupied. Actually, she had merely said preoccupied, and Alexander had interpreted the selfish, or was it 'shellfish'? He had been upset by his father's coolness. Ruth called his uneasiness 'Wimpdom Symptoms', the only time she had bothered to use his phrase.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE SUN : AUGUST 5:

I stand on the stairway of the Temple of the Sun, one of Chan-Bahlum's buildings. Son of the great Lord Shield Pacal, Chan-Bahlum continued the glory of the Florescent period (625-800 a.d.)

The sun symbol of the Temple: a mask held by crossed spears, with two priests, both holding up idols. The priests stand on the backs of the human beings, the human figures bending beneath the weight, one on its hands and knees, the other crushed.

The liquor. Yes, Arnett needs it. Alexander could not help himself as he flipped past the drawing of the pummelled human figure and read on.

F.A. PALENQUE : AUGUST 9:

Ez: someone enchanted or bewitched.

"Ez en tumen, Pacal."

Pacal has bewitched me.

F.A. PALENQUE : AUGUST 9:

It is so simple. If you want to know these people, study their agriculture. Swidden, slash-and-burn; this is really the only thing, is it not? Find a field for the purpose, a milpa, take along the tools, a xul and a baat, stick and axe, and plant. PLANT. That is all. Slash-and-burn. Simmons.

Swidden is not the only way, Frederick. What about the new theory? The raised cornfields, Frederick, you know they were leaning that way. You can't just ignore the new theories, what does it do to yours?

But you're like a zopilote, a buzzard flying over, you circle and you signal and you hang around for death. I'm standing in my pinstripe now, I'm wearing my own clothes, while you circle omens, fitful, as you wait.

"Arnett, there's only this. I doubt you've ever tried it." Alexander offered the man the container, which the other took, sniffing it professionally.

"Hmmmph...you sure this isn't furniture polish?" he said, a dubious expression on his face. "Jesus, you could run a truck off the road with this stuff," he muttered, tilting the jar slightly, studying the movement of the liquid and muttering again, something about a man named Lube who once drank furniture polish. "How do you know if this stuff's aged properly?" he asked, not a little perturbed.

"Arnett, aging can't be something you generally worry about."

The man cackled. "Why, thank ye, sonny, you don't look so bad yerself. 'Course, the trousers hide a multitude of sins."

A multitude of sins, a thousand flaws, the funeral-suit; isn't this where he came in? "Try it, Arnett, go sit down. I'll crouch here with Marsha."

Arnett mumbled something about his mother's homemade cough medicine and went over to the bed.

Marsha. Her head had slumped down toward the beachball, and she seem to be asleep or entranced. Entranced. En-tranced.

"Hey Marsha, you want to move or something, you want to lie down?" Alexander soaked the cloth, as Arnett had instructed him, and dabbed it on her forehead. He also washed her arms, neck and any other part of her body that was exposed. The body still covered with the soaking nightgown. Surely Alfreda kept something here, had something clean. Alexander pulled Alfreda's cardigan off the chair and draped it around Marsha's shoulders.

"Marsha, you should be in hospital. I'll call for an ambulance."

She shook her head determinedly. "No way, Aurelie."

"Marsha, don't be stupid; this is too fucking dangerous!"

"I said no!" A stab caught her and she shook. Then she said, "dangerous," and laughed in a high jagged voice; confused him, he frowned in alarm.

Alexander turned to Arnett. "Could you look in the drawers for a nightgown?"

Alexander was leaning back on the bed, his pale skull getting a heat treatment from the bed lamp. He was blocking the light.

"Arnett!"

The old man wiped his lips with the back of his hand, thick liquid sticking to the stubble on his face. "I make it a point never to look into a woman's drawers unless she asks me," he said,

and began licking around his mouth like a cat. "'Sides, she'll soak it through. She's supposed to sweat, keeps the baby inside from dyin' of B.O."

Alexander looked pleadingly at Arnett and the old man sighed loudly. "You are honest-to-Godly the most unnatural thing I've ever seen." He heaved himself off the bed. "Typical father, I might add."

It occurred to Alexander that Arnett didn't know. "I am not a father," he protested.

"Give it time, ace."

Alexander decided against the nightgown, neglecting to consult Marsha on the topic. He held her spongy hand. So who is the father, Marsha? What kind of a man got underneath that bloated body at the thin girl, at greyish confused eyes and hair that fuzzed around her forehead? Alexander wondered if this was how he was born, to a struggling, confused woman who went through it alone. Alexander squeezed Marsha's hand. Why wouldn't she talk to him? Her breathing was more regular for the moment, she could say something. Alexander realized that he wanted her to talk to him, let him in on it, tell him everything was alright, everything normal.

Everything normal but the fact that she is not my mate, this is not my child, there is a withered war hero drinking primitive booze in a nun's bed, while my seemingly disturbed father could well have been murdered. Nice staging. Surely this is a big enough act to tour with Vaudeville - circus clowns in the center ring,

no less! And in the center ring, ladies and gentlemen, the ceiba tree...the blue canvas firmament, and the grinning hoard of onlookers.

Arnett wandered over to the window and looked down at the street. From where Alexander was kneeling he could see past Arnett to the night sky so bright and snow laden that Arnett appeared silhouetted against it. "Outline the holy ones..." he murmured.

Arnett turned before it actually began. He bent down and helped Marsha balance, she grabbed his arm and pulled him still further down. She was gasping, clinging to Arnett's arm and staring all the time at Alexander. "Aurelie," she wrenched out; "help me."

Alexander felt trapped in this room inhabited by patterns on the carpet, curving shadows, patterns gods and saints on top thorns and hearts of sacrifice.

"Doctor, Marsha, we have to..."

Arnett exploded. "Good God, this isn't how you wanted to do it?"

"The hospital, Marsha."

She thrashed wildly then stopped, taking short hard breaths. He could see the fear in her eyes in his eyes are together her face skin stretching taut. "No knives!" she shrieked. "No more knives!" A low broken voice began from somewhere, the center of

the room, beside Arnett, beside Alexander, the voice. Marsha's head dropped to her belly as the words one by one followed her spasms: "Ah pul anat, ah pul anat mo."

Alexander remembered. It was what Simmons had said at the hospital.

"Marsha, what is it?"

"Hun yah ual anomob! Hun yah ual cab, Aurelie!" she yelled threateningly, shaking Arnett's already shaking arm. Alexander held her other arm, supported her at the shoulder.

"Damned sorcerer," she almost whispered, "who causes cry, who causes macaw cry." Her body contracted, Alexander felt the spasm as he held on. He looked at Marsha squatting and thought of Ruth, leap-frogging across the continent. She would not have been able, she couldn't do this. Ancient cataclysm, the lines on the carpet converging at Marsha's feet, blues rusts browns, geometric swirling at her feet.

Arnett looked frightened as he held her arm, pushed her hair back. He shifted his glance from Marsha to Alexander. "What's she sayin'? Talk to her, will ye?"

"Marsha..."

"Enemy of the Anoms, enemy of Mankind!" she cried. Marsha jerked suddenly and Arnett took the blow straight on the arm. He was knocked back on his haunches, and tipped sideways like an empty bottle. He winced, but righted himself and took hold of her again.

"Hooo sonny, yer missus is a tank..."

"Ye Gods, ye Bacabs, who was your Creator? Who created You?" she was torturing herself, forcing the words out one by one, the lamp shining into the carpet, onto her body, onto the head inside. Sweat on her face rich glistening beads.

"Who are you? You are, how? Mo tancas, macaw seizure...you are cuyum, snake blood madness, moth larvae of day, snake of night, suppurating blood..."

She was choking, it seemed, eyes bulging out of her skull.

"Get the nightgown!" Arnett bellowed.

Nightgown ripped off, her hair caught forcing head back, breasts jutting shining. "Hochan-ek," she pushed the words out, "Thirteen are my Fathers, how?"

The thirteen heavens, Alexander thought. The thirteen heavens and the nine hells. "Marsha, come on...thirteen heavens, Marsha."

Her eyes his.

"Thirteen heavens, kid...come on!"

"Aurelie!" she screamed.

Lines on the carpet, right angles, perpendicular squares into squares, colours converging into the patterns, square within square within smaller and smaller...

Her body shaking spasmodically the skin on her thighs and knees taut white, fingernails digging into Alexander's wrist. Animal noises, grunting, low guttural moans, high shrieking cries. She spread her thighs, Alexander could feel her forcing herself to

remain in that position.

"Ix-Hol-can-be," she wailed, pushing the words now out of her belly. "Hochan-ek," and between her legs he could see a shape beginning to emerge. It was a head. Arnett grabbed a clean blanket and placed it at the opening, readying himself to take hold of the slithery mottled shape.

"That's it, honey...here it comes!"

Circle sliding, grunting in the ears, pushing motion by all three people and now a larger circle appearing. A long and skinny snake? Arm. Arm trunk beachball, it shakes! Wakes itself up, arm is awake and pushing its way out!

"My God!" Arnett cried.

Two beachballs attached by adjacent plastic or a cord, cord the room pounding with one heartbeat, the new heartbeat.

"It's moving already...God...it's already crying!"

Wriggled itself out onto the blanket.

"It's a boy!" Arnett awed and shivering. "Never seen a kid born breathing like that. It's a boy," he repeated.

It was little. Arnett held it in a blanket, fidgetting with a cord. Alexander was watching Marsha. She was adrift in the waters inside her, eyes floating in her head. Her fingernails slowly unclawed themselves from his wrist, revealing smile curves of blood.

Arnett showed her the little shape. "It's a boy," he chanted.

Marsha had sunk deeper into the waters inside her, moaned as they

rushed from her body. Her stomach a collapsed beachball, messy and deflated. She closed her eyes and lay her head in Alexander's lap.

Arnett was working over the baby, wrapping him in a flannel sheet. Alexander was watching Marsha's breasts, her breathing was slow now, her torso wet and clammy. For some reason he thought she was quite beautiful, and he pushed her damp hair back and kissed the temple. Arnett brought the baby over and placed it beside her. The baby's head was delicate, Alexander thought. A pliable little sphere that could be molded. But it had made it so far. It had a closed up face, but it was missing the empty grin of a Vaudevillian, and its skull was untouched.

"You did it, Marsha," he whispered, leaning over her slightly so the Demented Comedians might not see the empty cavern.

"You did it."

Arnett looked exhausted. He brought fresh water and cloths to Alexander and said, "Here you go, boy. My midwife days are over. Between your everlovin' storm trooper here, and your first-time-father gawking, I'm all played out...here...you know what to do with this stuff...by the way, congratulations to ye both."

They carefully helped Marsha over to the bed and maneuvered her into it. Alexander took the face cloth and squeezed warm water through it. He slowly traced the outline of Marsha's body with the wet cloth, gently pressing and patting the skin.

"The faery-beam upon you, Marsha," he whispered, reading the quote on the coverlet, "the stars to glister on you."

Alexander saw Arnett leaving the room, and the old man looked back on the family. He cleared his throat and stared fondly at the child. Then he turned to Alexander and said, "Baby doesn't look like you."

"It is not my child," Alexander said.

Arnett hunched his shoulders in a 'you kids these days' shrug and added, "doesn't look like her either."

Which was true enough. Marsha's arm encircled the little boy, her fair skin a marked contrast to the bronzed dark features of the child. The father must have been dark, probably Mexican.

Alexander sat with Marsha, patting her forehead with the cloth until she fell asleep. The room was silent, that untampered silence he remembered before Vaudeville. Many types of quiet for those who care to listen. Quiet of Sundays along pathways on the mountain; quiet before the coffee begins to perk in the morning. Quiet of your lover sleeping silent in your arms. And this, the close, calm quiet of a mother and a child. Marsha's whole body seemed to arch toward the small bundle, the baby in the crook of her arm. One body accommodating another.

He remembered something he'd read about the women of Palenque. They apparently had not been allowed into the Temples because they

were regarded as having a special magic of their own. Something like this, perhaps. Something like this.

Alexander wandered back to his own room. He noticed at the bottom of a low set of shelves a large wooden box with the name "SANDOR" printed in bold yellow letters. He'd almost forgotten. Alexander pulled it out and flipped back the latches, tugging at the lid. It yawned but complied, and he was staring at his childhood treasures. The early books, the stuffed lamb, the wind-up rodeo star with the removable lasso and the pair of Alfreda's doll's underpants stretched over it, so the cowboy perpetually looked as though he'd just missed capturing the entire girl. The toy train. And then way back, possibly the first toy, the stuffed giraffe with the orange and brown body and the quizzical felt eyes. "Giraffe Sees God," he remembered his bedtime prayer.

He lifted the toy out of the box. This was strongly made, this box, perhaps she could use it as a crib. Alexander removed the toys, spread them out on the floor around him. Maybe she could use it, he tugged.

Box. Put a baby in a box! They chortled. Take a baby from a box. This was good, They turned the beam on him. Put a baby in a box, handles like little door knockers on pillow-boxes, father in shadow, mother's rough hair and now this baby. Born in a trunk! one of Them shrieks, slapping another on the back. Boy was born in a trunk. Vod'Vil forever!

Nono...stop! Whirls in beam turning at light, box named "SANDOR" open in light, contents exploded. Exposed. He is not one of You, Alexander said angrily.

He released his grip on the box. He picked up the giraffe, it was dusty despite its enclosed protection. He shook it as he walked back to Alfreda's room.

The small brown boy was gumming eagerly at Marsha's left breast. She was looking down at him with some degree of consternation. Alexander approached awkwardly and stood beside Marsha.

"Uh...this...this was the first thing...it's a little dusty so I'll leave it over here...I can clean it up if you want it... for him."

"He cried as he was coming out?" she looked at the baby nervously.

Alexander stiffened. "He cried as he was coming in."

Marsha looked at Alexander with quizzical eyes.

III Matapalo

Men to the Temple. Priest shaman will speak with God Chac. The Mighty Chacs will bring rain, guard the corners of this world. North, East, South, West - white, red, yellow, black. Men must purify themselves and offer sacrifices to Chacs, Gods of Rain. Great Lord Pacal calls his people to the priests in this most holy city.

Bodies shuffling, collecting wood, balche bark, hands work quickly and skilfully with obsidian, jade, quetzal feathers. Short, thick bodies squat against stone, push forward and rise, dust clings to shoulder blades and straight black hair tied tightly at back. Palenque jewel pulsing in heat, indented foreheads bow in respect and brightness of sun. One more look to the jungle then men of Palenque move toward the Temple.

It is green, all of it overgrown. On Frederick, Alexander thought, striking the desk with his fist, slowly, knuckles hitting wood.

F.A. PALENQUE : AUGUST 10:

Balche. Balche as I used to distribute. To Simmons, York, Corinda, Millar.

To have done it all correctly, to do it correctly. Sacrifices to any god must be done with dedication. I needed them all to help, body too weak to do it alone. Simmons objecting to me all along. York and Corinda not knowing enough. Millar knew, she understood and helped me. Simmons called it perversion; Millar knew better. This was a priest's role! Something done by a priest. I tried to explain it, it is what the ceremonial altars were for. I never said I would do the ultimate honour, the ultimate sacrifice. Why wouldn't they listen to me? To spatter blood, life-giving...to offer blood...why didn't they understand?

F.A. PALENQUE : AUGUST 11:

All night I debate the undebatable. What must be done, I know what must be done. Why didn't they listen? It is all right, all are gone. All but Simmons. Sacrifice - sacrifice to the Gods of Palenque - God "L", the Jaguar God, the Jester God, the Chacs... How do you account to them, how do you make atonements to each one? Do you dismiss them as my son once did? A life of study. My son. Why could I not have had a son like Chan-Bahlum? How do you build a glorious world without continuity? Sons that turn from fathers, refuse to continue - how do you build like this? August 11: today is the anniversary of the Creation of the Fifth Cycle, according to Thompson, with whom I agree (there is always a day or a year that is debated.) Happy Birthday, dusty planet. Isn't that what my son once called you? A dull, dusty planet? Fool of a son. Fool. What more can I do from here?

Father, what have you done from there? Alexander paced the room, aware of the books on the shelves, aware of the closed quarters. You didn't stay temporal, you didn't stick to your own time, you succumbed, didn't you? Fool of a father, Alexander mouthed the words and continued reading.

Incense to the Gods. What I need for the Temple, what I need for the sacrifice. One can almost see the underpinning here, the soft film of time spread translucent over everything, shaping itself to everything, as I do. The Matapalo in the jungle entwining the bark, entangling the tree.

I will bring the sacred blood-letter and the barbed rope. For today is a special occasion - the Creation of my world.

Alexander was clutching his groin, guarding himself from assault. He read on, the nightmare focussing at last. The retching of his insides as the words became the vision.

Long nosed Mayan, sloped forehead, dressed in elaborate coloured fabric, jade earplugs, shell and shark teeth necklaces, bracelets. The priest painted and plumed.

And he is carrying the blood-letter, plumed in quetzal feathers. Alexander, his loincloth removed, stripped naked. Not tied yet incapable of movement. The Mayan is approaching with the blood-letter. And he hands it to Alexander and Alexander reaches for it! Reaching for the knife. At the edges of his eyes he can see others, their ears, thighs, tongues bleeding.

Sitting on the low, four legged stool, his other hand grasps his penis. The quill shaped knife sharp, Alexander steeling himself. Holding his organ steady and slicing into it, blood running. Punctured, now the barbed cord is inserted, tight, pull pull through. Thorny thread pulled back and forth ripping tissue and membrane. Blood collecting in a stone bowl to be spattered on the faces of the idols. Head reeling with gods.

The markings a plane crash could not have made. Surgical precision of sacrifice. The Matapalo in the jungle.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS : AUGUST 12:

Simmons and I are playing a game of hide-and-seek among the ruins, I'm afraid. We both know too much about the place, its architecture then and now, that it makes the game interesting, at least. He knows where to find me, but he will not come to this place of sacrifice, to any of these places. Not while I am performing rites.

Temple of the Inscriptions - Shield Pacal's tomb. Most beautiful, a monument befitting so great a ruler. This is the building into which the sun sinks. (It was designed so that, during the winter solstice, the sun appears to set on the structure itself.)

Why am I sacrificing here today? Dangerous in so observed a place. I am disturbed by this yet even now feel the majesty of this place enthralling and terrorizing me.

Bone debility. I feel my bones loosening from their sockets, an absurd clatter on the inside of my flesh. To sacrifice blood, to make oneself pure before the Gods. Pure. To be clean again. But this damned clattering, I cannot concentrate, cannot properly prepare myself. No one to pray for me, over me, to remove the clattering of my bones, the swift wind whistling through my skull. The incantation must come from this voice, alone among the ruins, as the sunlight glints off stones and disappears.

What enters to the bones? What enters to the tendons?

The red say-ant, the white say-ant, the yellow say-ant, fresh vigor, fresh blood. The red sprinkler-gourd, the white sprinkler-gourd, the black sprinkler-gourd, the yellow sprinkler-gourd. Great closer, great assembler, come then to mend the opening in my bones. Red, white, black, yellow alleviators; the supreme Coxalhun, "Thirteen" resin am I.

This then is the hand of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father, father, how you put them all together. How the Mayans too were taught to put them all together. The Mayans duped

the Spaniards into thinking they believed. Who do you pray to as you slice yourself to pieces? Whoever it is, believe me, while you do it, Vaudeville laughs.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS : AUGUST 14:

The Mayans excellent mathematicians; developed the concept of zero. This is exactly how much time the other has left. He is foolish, and I do not suffer fools gladly.

Simmons out there hiding. Perhaps he is not hiding, he would say, perhaps, observing. Yes, that would carry the necessary comic grotesque. The archaeologist observing the archaeologist, quaint. This Temple is well structured, I could stand along the top, leaning against the alfarda, and watch him all day. He knows the Temples as well as I, we see each other constantly. There are others here occasionally, guides, a few tourists; but they come and they gawk and they go, and they all leave me alone. I thrive in this heat, they do not. My orchids, matapalos, are capable of encircling the trees, living and thriving in the jungle heat, in the depths of the rain forest.

I believe I could find Simmons at the Foliated Cross. It is far enough away to give the illusion of solitude. It has come to this, my colleague and my friend.

F.A. PALENQUE : AUGUST 15:

The Palace - hieroglyphic stairway, Tower, buildings, sacbeob, all uniquely Palencano. Glyph-trimmed, roof-combed structures, insets, overlays. This was the judicial centre of Palenque. In the Northwest Court are two limestone slabs, with nine larger than life carvings of...priests? Rulers? (When we do not know, we speculate, and then I speculate further.)

Who are these men? One of the nine is blood-letting, that is my occupation now. The figure on the far right of the second slab is performing my ritual. But this figure is bound. Some are not as enthusiastic as others. He must be the most honoured one, the ultimate sacrificial victim. Although they have exposed his penis from the loinskin, they have also bound him, which probably means they will have his heart removed after the blood-letting. They will pray over

him, incantations, they will spatter blood from his loins and their own, and to please the Gods, they will bend his body back against a stone slab, insert a knife to separate the skin, and wrench the beating heart out of the man. They will throw it at the figure of a God, staining the statue's lips with the heart blood.

Alexander's hands clutched his penis and chest. He could no longer stand up, and slumped in the chair. Turning the page he was suddenly staring at a line drawing. An amorphous, smooth-edged form was kneeling, one hand on its heart, the other on its hip, or thigh, it was difficult to tell. Underneath it were written the words:

One of the figures in the Palace carving - could be a slave or a chief. This is the position of subordinacy. Appears often in Mayan art. Signifies - obedience.

Alexander stood up slowly, gripping the sides of the chair. Slaves or chiefs, it really doesn't matter, does it, not the way that Vaudeville plays.

F.A. PALENQUE : AUGUST 15:

If one knows what one is doing, one can adequately prepare for the future. But we must ready a field to plant the new world in. The earth, flat, four-cornered, in the center the ceiba. The milpa, the used cornfield, must be systematically destroyed. Slash-and-burn. Swidden. I must begin with a clean world.

Simmons clutches at the old beliefs, grabbing at the globe, slipping his grip as the supposed sphere spins off in a new direction. He contaminates this place with his very presence, his lack of belief. And it is I who will attend to the purification.

But what about the new theories, father? The raised cornfield theory? How can you know?

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS : AUGUST 6:

And it is here that I come for strength, to inhale the glyphs on the walls, incantations, chants and stories of this place. Learning by osmosis. Inhaling the colour of all things holy. Yax is the colour, blue-green like the polished jade, fresh corn, and the ceiba. Blue-green like the bead lying still in Pacal's silent mouth.

The Bacabs hold up the corners of the sky, the ceiba bearing the center weight, roots reaching into the Underworld. But it is the four Pahuatans positioned in Metnal who balance this flat earth. And so I come here for strength, waiting in this tomb.

How it must have been for Ruz-Lhuillier when it finally came to this. The Temple had already been excavated, or so they all believed. And then my precursor discovers, in a corner, the false floor. By 1950 they have scraped out forty-six stairs in the depths of the structure. By 1951, thirteen more steps unearthed. And in 1952, he finds this, the outer burial room, the six skeletons of the servants, or chosen ones.

To have been with him on this expedition! To have been there when the north wall was prodded, was found to be hollow. To have discovered the grotto with its hieroglyphs, stalagmites, stalactites...and the triangular slab that guarded the final five steps down.

Stalagmites. Alexander remembered. He was only a boy when his father had told him of this place, the great adventure repeated again and again to the young child, as the canutillo was stuffed with picietl, and his father smoked and talked. Alexander remembered now the picture it created in his mind, stalagmites straining upward in the musty, damp cold room, almost touching stalactites that forced his vision down. How the feeling had stayed with him, become the image for Laurelie Leclerc's story as he told it in Stalagmite Statues. You never finished the book, father. The vantage point so different, but it's stalagmites

we study. Separated things reaching upward, hardened.

Ruz descends the final five, comes upon the limestone slab, of the monster and the man. The Earth Monster balancing precariously, while enormous jaws reach up to take the man. And the tree behind the human figure, the ceiba stretching up and down. The tomb of Shield Pacal.

Sarcophagus - in a red sepulcher, the body of Shield Pacal. A tall, broad man, so still he lies in perpetual mystic pensiveness, the collapsed jade death mask staring into Eternity, pondering the Terror.

And he sees his father, stiff and tall, standing with Harry and Alfie, moving on invisible winds toward the pillow-box. The boy's legs itch, the woollen pants hot and prickly, and he skids along the wall opposite the crowd. He knows he should be over there, his father has motioned twice. But they blubber in that corner, and their running noses sniffle. His father does not sniffle, straight and tanned from his recent adventure, he looks important, nodding to people there in his dark suit.

His mother looks so silly in the puffy pillow-box. They've made her cheeks red like his crayon, and it hurts him just to look at her when she does not look back. Her soft blue eyes are closed, and he cannot see the space in her smile where she told him of a tooth, falling on a frozen lake when she skated and slipped when she was just a girl. He has touched her hair, it is so stale to his hand. He wants to bury his head in her middle

as he does when she smiles at him, but the white and shiny waxwork keeps him wandering the walls.

And his father slowly comes to him and motions for his hand. "Come, Sandor," he says quietly, "you will come and see your mother."

Every step the boy takes as he dangles from the arm is filled with itchy prickles as the new pants walk with him. "Mummy isn't here," he complains, slowing his steps and being pulled closer. "She's gone, mummy's gone."

Alfreda, young awkward girl, takes the other hand. "Mummy's gone to God," she coos, although her cheeks are red and swollen. Horace stands silently beside the coffin, fingering the black ebony wood.

"Children," the tall man gathers them in front of him as they all look on the box. "Children, this is death."

Alexander was crying, for the woman in the box, for the boy who did not cry. No picture of his mother on this desk, no samplers calling out from the walls. Father, I saw you that day when we were leaving. You, talking to the funeral director while we were being herded out of the room. I saw you there, at the last minute, before they were about to close the lid. You stood by her blankly, and then you reached down under the satin and took her by the hand.

When did you do that while she lived? You were never even there. Is this the only time you can understand - when it's too late? Her hands did things, touched you, caressed your body when you lay together, created samplers. Did you ever notice her hieroglyphs? Did any of us? All over this house, in every room but this one, my mother was telling her story, enclosed squares you could no more decipher than these damned tomb markings. And then when it's too late you're reaching for her hand.

None of us understood dots and dashes in thread, her pitiful distress signals. She would play her card games alone at the kitchen table, the red queens falling, the black queens falling. And she knew. The Black is the West, and the Black is Night. The Red is the East, life-giving. And her red cards and her black, shuffled here and in Vaudeville. She could never come up winning, not with Them and not with you.

Shuffle, flip, snap. And Vaudeville snorts obscenely as the woman bets her life. She's playing odds, knows half are hers, thinks half are on her side. But you're off in Palenque, Westernmost Holy Site, its symbol is the Vulture and its colour Black as Night.

Tell me about it, Frederick. Tell me that the red of the sepulcher is life-giving, that Pacal can make the Night Journey safely. Tell me that this makes a difference, that you didn't kill her as a sacrifice to Vaudeville. Draining the blood

from the body of a living thing to have it trickle down the
bored face of an idol. Altruistic absurdity as it trickles
to the ground; the pumping heart is stilled.

Alexander was thinking of Marsha. She bled, life-giving,
giving life, the red is...

Vaudeville was shrieking in his brain. They pulled and
wrenched and forced "Auld Lang Syne" onto his lips, substituting
words:

Yet now, dad, we salute you, 'cause you're offering your own,
You're puncturing yourself and you're leaving us alone.
You're leaving us alone again, you're leaving us alone,
You're cutting through yourself, for once, and you're leaving
us alone.

This Mayan side show was great - first father and now
son. What a team! No. Never with Frederick; anyone, anyone
else. Alexander clenched his lips and etched "NO" on his top
teeth with his bottom teeth.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE CROSS : AUGUST 17:

I visit the house of my son. One of three buildings
constructed by Chan-Bahlum after his father's death.
Strange how he built the observation tower higher than my
own. This internal staircase in the roof-comb allows him
more vision than I have from the Temple of the Inscriptions.
So like a son to try and outdo a father. I am not angry
with him. Together Pacal and his son established and
perpetuated Mayan Holy Rule in these Temples, on this
most holy ground.

I see what is happening, where the interface occurs. Can
you see what you are doing, Frederick? Do you remember this son's

voice? You're feeling at the boundaries, like Ruz at the north wall; you've prodded and you've felt and you've found the room behind. Like the still-pulsing human heart in the face of the god, you can feel the pressure, the absence of pressure, as you slip in and out of your temporal self.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE CROSS : AUGUST 18:

This morning Simmons motioned to me from the Palace. He has insisted that we meet - he knows better, knows he can insist on nothing. But, watching him wander around the Palace complex this afternoon with that ludicrous nervousness, the jerking and pecking motions, I decided that it might be interesting to have an encounter.

Most unusual man, his voice used to mean something to my ears. Yet as we walked toward each other I found I could no longer be concerned with his strange ravings. The poor man - yes, at times I almost feel sorry for him. His skull is internally deformed; he believes so innocently all the doctrines. He began carefully enough with a plea for our return:

"Frederick, we do have our schedule to keep to. We should have left long ago. How will you coordinate your data for the lecture tour in the fall? University starts the first week of September and the tour soon after that."

Dear practical Edward. And then came the long stares balanced by jerking and pecking motions, as he studied from a distance my bruised neck, swollen mouth. Makes talking difficult but then, I do not talk to this man.

"Frederick, why don't we get out of here? You need some rest. I've never seen you so...drawn..." the voice trailed off and he flinched and sputtered.

I have no patience with such things! Why should I be forced to acknowledge this man? He stands on holy ground and is contaminated. So, I moved toward him, not speaking, my lips still caked with blood, the flower in my buttonhole pulsing and vibrating. As he paused he flicked his head like a bird, like a wrist, and then started backing away. I wanted to grin but the clotted blood would not allow it. It cracked and peeled, my tongue releasing blood, mouth filling with blood. He looked at me with fear and respect. Blood dribbled down the side of my mouth, I felt it dripping from my chin. How full of wonder he was! Most holy, I expect, to blood-let naturally. I decided to go to

the Temple and complete it properly. He skulked back under a rock and I went about my business.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS : AUGUST 19:

Weary, Pacal, I am so tired. Simmons still succeeds in frustrating me. Brings back memories of the other time. Local colouring, he always has the local colouring: Montreal, the university, the lecture tour, the family. He tries to appeal to me using these tools, to pick, peck away at me with mementos of a dying civilization. Fool. He could have assisted me here, as he always did, but no.

A family? Yes, but not that family. The other ones in that other time. I have chosen a new family. The other ones do not enter into this framework unless they are forced upon me. At times I can hardly remember them, they are blurred now. The daughter, yes, the quiet determined one; and the son who would take care of things in my absence. Yes, that family. They never understood, but it was really not their fault. No potential for salvation there.

Who are you to try and save us? Father and children, two things you never understood. Arnett and Arnett's son, you could never understand that.

Where was Arnett? Alexander felt sudden panic, and searched the house rapidly, poking in and out of rooms looking for the now familiar brown coat.

Up the stairs. Inside, Marsha and the small boy; the giraffe had joined them in bed. He touched the fuzz on the infant's head and brushed his hand across the mother's forehead. He whispered, "Marsha, have you seen Arnett?" She struggled with her eyelids and the baby's nightshirt, and shook her head.

"He said he was going for something, or something...I didn't

hear him leave."

"You let him go?"

She shrugged in confusion. "Alex...Alexander?"

He raced downstairs and out the kitchen door. It was not yet dawn, the snow had a faint bluish tint. Wind stirred sleeping branches, clacked clothesline ropes. The loose coat flapping behind him, Arnett walking slowly down the lane.

"Hey Arnett, wait!"

The dark form wavered then stopped, maneuvered its cane and propped itself up beside a shed. Arnett sat gingerly on the edge of a garbage can.

"Tired, boy," Arnett said as Alexander reached him. "I'm bloody tired."

Although the night air was making Alexander shiver, Arnett's neck was exposed and he was sweating. His accordion skin had sunk deeper into itself, he grunted as he leaned his skull against the side of the shed.

"Don't leave," Alexander said. "Uh...it's cold outside and you don't have a hat...Christ, you don't have any gloves! What's the matter with you?" He remembered Arnett's own words. "Where you been all your life?"

The laneway blue, clean in the half-light, two sets of footprints behind them, starlight around them. "The faery-beam upon ye," Arnett traded quietly. Small, winter animals scuttled about behind garbage cans, birds balanced on icy clotheslines,

waiting for morning.

"You always loved your son, Arnett."

The old man jolted at the statement. "'Ya mean. 'Course, my son." He shook his head, staring at Alexander with question marked eyes. "Listen kid, I don't know what yer problem is. I don't know if yer havin' second thoughts about that baby the missus just had. I don't know a lot of things." He planted his shoe in the fresh snow beside the shed. "Seems to me it doesn't matter where the kid comes from, so long as you can love it, I guess."

Alexander crunched the snow around the edges of the garbage can. "And the kid...the kid should love the parent, just because it's there?"

"Why not?" he smiled. "Balances things out, dontcha think? 'Course, that's not all there is to it. There's more, if you have room for it."

Alexander was thinking of his guarded Empty Space, and Vaudeville. "You love your dead son, Arnett."

"Ya. The boy, Shuster, he's dead. He's...well, he's almost an idea to me now. Somethin' more than just the boy, y'know? Somethin' I think about when I'm walkin' around the mountain, or when I wander into the old neighbourhood..."

"Does it make you feel good?"

"What?"

"Thinking of him."

"Not always...there's a lot I can't change, a lot... hell, there's not a damned thing I can change! But somehow, it gets different. In a way...brain puts things in order so's to get them to make some sense to ye. I don't know...get older too, I guess."

Arnett's older body stood up from the garbage can. They began walking slowly, and Arnett pointed to the clothesline dabbled with sparrows.

"Y'know, sparrows are sure funny. They perch up there on that line and puff themselves up, like, they fluff their feathers up, for protection. But some of them sit there so damned long they freeze to death, freeze solid on that bloody line. Crazy, eh?"

Arnett began a hacking cough and his eyes watered with the strain. Alexander helped him, pulling his brown coat around him and folding it tightly at the neck. "Where you been all your life?" he said, as they trudged along.

"Arnett, do you believe in God?" He wanted to know what Arnett thought, surely he knew Them too.

The old man eyed him suspiciously. "'Course. What a ridiculous question."

"Is it?"

"What?"

"Is it possible...how do you know there's only one?"

The old man harrumphed. "I expect one's sufficient for most of us, sonny. With a mind like that, fella could wonder if there's any at all."

Oh, there are. If there weren't the odds would almost be fair.

"But what if They...It...wasn't good?"

"Now wait a..."

"And wasn't bad either! Originally, I mean. What if, maybe, They were just having a good time, keeping busy, keeping out of trouble...but...They got so They had less and less to do, you know, as we learned things and didn't need Them...They got bored..."

"Be careful what you're sayin', kid."

"Became Squatters...moved around. And now there's only a few of us who know how They've degenerated, become irresponsible, dangerous, and They're claiming people in the gut, in the Empty Space, turning our emotions into Wimpdom Symptoms..."

"Quiet down!" the man ordered. "I said, pipe down!"

Alexander held his stomach as he spoke, thinking They might be monitoring the Empty Space. "The Mayans have a god they call the Jester God, think of it! They're arbitrary, They do what They like..."

Arnett shook his head wearily. "Do you think I don't get no say, do you think I go around numb, boy? When I can, when I

can get a hold of some..."

"I don't mean you. Don't you see? You understand Them, too! And you won't let Them get to you."

"You know, you really are unnatural sometimes."

Alexander frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, to begin with...seems to me that these Mayans or whatever probably didn't call their gods by anythin' you'd particularly know about. Squatters, shit! Seems to me it's people that comes afterwards that's always namin' things. Anyway, what do you know...explain that to me again, that Wimpdom Symptom."

"What...what, you know...it happens to peoples' feelings... any kind of weakness, emotional..."

"That's what you got, kid. Weak emotions. Ye got it bad."

"Ya? Well before, when you were talking about Shuster, about planes, when you said the mountain couldn't stop them, who..."

Arnett folded his arms determinedly across his chest, the cane wavering close to Alexander's face.

"You are honest-to-God as dumb as a stick! Us! I meant us! I meant a son that would sign up at seventeen when he'd seen what it's done to his old man. I mean the kind of brains that gives out prizes for knocking out a guy's senses with yer bare hands. And that ain't anything like the old Vaudeville days. I was around them, remember: that ain't Vaudeville, kid, that's us!"

"How could you, look what They did..."

"Hell boy, I did this! You and yer damned empty spaces! This ain't No Man's Land, this is yer régime...hmmm...picked that up in France. Régime."

"Arnett, the Gods..."

Arnett stopped and shrugged away from Alexander. "Look, I don't know. Maybe yer Gods are callin' the shots. But mine lets me trip myself up, okay?"

They approached the back of the house, not talking, silent in the falling snow. The flakes glistened around the porch light. And Alexander could see Arnett in uniform, squinting a little at the Vaudevillian army closing in on him. Coloured lights and coloured gases, screams that echoed, screams that didn't. Unnatural, the man shakes his head, crazy and unnatural. Alexander wanted to know this man who appraised oncoming onslaught with a deliberate shake of the head. He turned to face a man in a beat up brown coat. Arnett's nose was running and he looked tired but then, Arnett was old. The man bumped into Alexander and Alexander smiled. Older, perhaps, than Vaudeville.

When they entered the kitchen, Alexander noticed that Arnett was still shivering. He put the kettle on and made tea. He searched for Arnett's coverlet and remembered that the New One had it.

"Have to give you a plain blanket, Arnett. Just a pattern, no words."

"Suits me," the old man answered. "Ye got me all memorized anyway."

Alexander flicked off the light switch. "Right," he said in the darkness.

He climbed the stairs to Alfreda's room. Marsha was asleep with the baby at her side. He took up so little area, Alexander thought, so little space. This child, born in the womb, had emerged screaming.

"Screaming at this world," Alexander whispered.

Who are you, little thing, ball of flesh, a beachball inside Marsha, but what inside the beachball? What are you, bones not yet hardened, but angry fist pushing out of the womb. Marsha's skin parted and other skin, other flesh jutted out, anger born of this translucent woman asleep in a nun's bed. Will you remember anything of before, how you floated in this woman who floated on a planet in a sky of puffball clouds? Will you know how she looked, her pain as you squirmed your way through the orifice of your conception, how an old man paper-skinned held you before her in a room with martyrs on the walls? Will you remember your anger?

"What'll happen to you?" Alexander studied the tiny profile, the eye slits shut, hands folded into fists. "I don't know any lullabyes, little one."

A greasy Vaudevillian was biting its fingernail absent-mindedly. It ripped off a piece of nail and spit it in the

direction of the baby. Oh, sure you do, honey, it scratched its stomach with the jagged nail. Randy Newman's "God's Song" was playing in his head. He had no desire to disturb Marsha's slumber, yet he put a finger out and touched the fist of the baby, as he sang sadly:

Man means nothing, he means less to me,
 Than the lowliest cactus flower, or the humblest yucca tree:
 Chases 'round this desert, 'cause he thinks that's where I'll be,
 That's why I love mankind...

The child was not moving, but Alexander could see Marsha stirring. She pouted in her sleep, or maybe bit her lip.

Christians and the Jews will have a jamboree,
 Buddhists and the Hindus join on satellite t.v.,
 Picked the four greatest priests, and they began to speak -
 Said, Lord the plague is on the world,
 Lord, no man is free,
 Temples that we built to you
 Are tumblin' to the sea.
 Lord, if you don't take care of us
 Won't you please, please let us be.
 And the Lord said,
 And the Lord said;
 I burn down your cities, how blind you must be,
 Take from you your children and you say,
 How blessed are we!
 You all must be crazy to put your faith in me.
 That's why I love mankind
 -You really need me-
 That's why I love mankind.

She was awake and looking at him. "Why would your God bother singing at all?" she asked quietly.

He turned away from her. He couldn't look at those eyes, those questioning eyes in the face of Laurelie Leclerc. Laurelie alone in the woods with her animals for company; Marsha in the bed of a virgin with an infant at her side.

"Did you find the old man?"

Why did she have to look at him so intently, he could feel her peeling away layers of his skin, burrowing into his exposed tissue.

"Why is everything so hard for you, Aurelie?"

She made him return her stare in the darkness, something forced him, her voice.

"You don't even know..."

"That you hate this place, Alexander?" She took his hand.

"Alexander...you're right, there's a lot about you I don't know. But you're wearing yourself thin, and I'm not sure you even know why. Alexander..." She pulled at his arm gently until his feet left the floor and he was stretched out on the bed.

"When I was a kid, I had a bout with polio. Freaked my mother out 'cause she thought the scare was over by then. I had to wear a brace for a while, and that was no picnic, you know what kids are like - and the parents are even worse. I'm convinced there's nothing worse than sugar-coated rat shit. Anyway, I was pretty miserable, there wasn't a lot for a kid with a brace to do, so of course I decided to run away. Stop me if you've heard this one before - I figured I could outrun the finger-pointing,

the jeers, the loneliness. All this running with a brace on my leg, right?"

The light was circling outside the window, it reminded him of the hall landing and the cold of the wooden floor pressing against his side, his body arching toward the light, as it did now around Marsha and the baby; they were all arching toward the window. Her voice lulling, evenly modulated, words evenly spaced each word separate spaces between light between sound between...

"So Grams would play Snakes and Ladders at my bedside all day, she was the only one who ever came, and one day she leaned forward right close to my face, so close I could feel her scraggly hair against my skin, and she said there was nothing at all so special about climbing up ladders..."

Mano against metate, make the pozole, sound against rock echoes off building of stone, sound muffled in walls of green jungle as man carving stone watches woman pounding zea mays singing quiet sounds to her corn to her hands.

"...have to be willing to dangle from snakes, climb slithering snakes to get there...Alexander?"

Warm her arm breast his hand near as she pushes hair his back slow, and voice like a sound off a green wall penetrates:

A la rorro niño, a la rorro ya,
Duermaseme mi niño, duermase ya...

Warm curves around him to the window, maybe, arching to the light. She is singing.

Everything was still when he awoke, and Alexander sat in a chair beside the bed for a while, then walked downstairs toward the room at the end of the hall; and although his stomach was in knots, it filled out the Empty Space.

IV Squatters' Rights

Bronze men watch as their priests, their shamans, drink balche. Shaman smokes picietl, zigar. Men squat, smoke tobacco, light and breathe. Smoke, air filled with smoke, aroma intoxicates, stagger with visions of shaman, God, Temples whirling Chac God, Bolon ti ku Thirteen Gods Nine Gods hands on ears on pulsing heart of God. Eyes to the jungle, the jungle shade cool green on the dust on their skin on the jungle in their eyes.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS : AUGUST 19:

I will have a son. I will have a successor. Pacal, you have Chan-Bahlum. And I will have a son. Continuity. We are nearing the end of the Fifth Earth. I shall not see this end, but I will have a son survive, and build.

13 . 0 . 0 . 0 . 0, 4 Ahau 8 Cumhu

13	=	baktuns	(144,000 days)
0's	=	katuns	(7,200 days)
		tuns	(360 days)
		uinals	(20 days)
		kims	(1 day)

August 11, 3114 B.C.

Long Count, nearing an end. The Great Collapse, predicted in Maya/Nahuatl myth. Goodman, Martinez, Thompson - the computations of my colleagues all coincide. According to the Mayans:

ON DECEMBER 24, 2011, THE FIFTH EARTH WILL BE DESTROYED.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS : AUGUST 20:

Simmons is out to destroy me, my descendants. He cannot bear the truth. It is up to me, ah pul uenel, the "wizard who causes sleep." It is up to the Matapalo.

I am weak, Pacal, from loss of blood. Making my way down the stone stairway to your crypt is becoming more difficult. What did it feel like, Pacal, to make the Night Journey? To fall toward the Earth Monster, as depicted on the sepulcher lid? I feel I soon will make the Night Journey, will meet you at last on the other side of Ruz's wall. And I will face Bolon ti ku, the Nine Lords of the Night.

But I will have a son continue. I shall name him Hochan-ek, "Scraped Star", and he shall announce the Sixth Earth.

Hochan-ek, the words echo off a green wall back at him, wailing.

Marsha was reading when he entered the room. She stared as he approached her, stiffened, her arm around the child, as he climbed into the bed beside her, saying nothing, eyes open wide.

"Uh, something wrong, Alex?" Marsha drew the covers up higher around herself. "Something the matter? Did you find him, anyway?"

Alexander squeezed the border of the quilt, repeating urgently, "The faery-beam upon you..." And he could see the bruised, bloodied man wending his way through the ruins, matapalo glowing in the claw of his outstretched arm. He could hear the ancient voice issuing from between parched lips, the man

praying or cursing in Mayan, the skull transforming, externally deforming, man, man slipping through centuries, waiting among the ruins.

"He destroyed himself," Alexander said.

Marsha's face stretched to an "O" at the mouth. "What? That old man did himself in?"

"Frederick...Matapalo, destroyed himself...and you knew it was happening!"

Vaudeville had slithered into the room, Marsha and Alexander on center stage. In the audience, the toughest critics of all, the Vaudeville Gods. They were watching closely, watching Marsha's blanched face, the nuances of Alexander's taut skin. Marsha's arm was useless, it could no longer hold onto the child. She removed her arm from the pose and stared down at the quiet baby. Alexander saw a look pass over her face, something between sadness and apathy, he wasn't sure.

"Ix-Hol-can-be!" he pronounced the phrase as he had heard Simmons say it, the phrase Marsha had wailed at birth. Her body trembled. He could see his father, tall, distant, staring down at a younger version of Alexander, Sandor looking up. Stalactites and stalagmites forever reaching toward one another in the hollow cavern, the Empty Space.

"Ix-Hol-can-be," he said again.

The baby awoke and began crying. Marsha seemed incapable

of comforting it, patting the little forehead feverishly.

"Leave me, leave me," she begged.

"You are Hol-can-be?" he demanded.

"Yes, now..."

"And this is Hochan-ek?"

She nodded.

"Scraped Star?"

Her face crumbled in her hands. "Lady Crossroads," her twisted mouth repeated to her fingers, "Hol-can-be." And suddenly, "Please hold on to me, Alex." She reached for his arm.

Tears spattered his face, wet the Cowardly Lion's face, great stone lions and a little boy riding frantically. Knowing he could never catch up because all the energy was coming from himself, the lions silent and unseeing. The chosen child.

Hochan-ek, Frederick's chosen son.

He pulled her head up.

"Is this my father's child?" he asked at last.

Marsha drew away from him and looked at the baby. "He... wanted it. He would take care of it, love it."

"Hochan-ek? Scraped Star?"

"Yes."

"He would love it? He said that?"

She nodded, wiping at tears.

"So that's why you came here...to give him this...this child

whom he would love? Come on, Marsha."

"He said. He promised. It was all arranged. We made a pact, had a deal," she began crying again.

"You made a deal over this kid? Like he was a bolt of cloth or a pair of fucking sandals? What kind of 'deal'?"

"If...if the child were a boy, I would give him up."

"To my father? Marsha, my father? What if it had been a girl?"

"A girl wouldn't..."

"Wouldn't 'do'? Yes, I know Frederick's hierarchy. Is this what you call climbing snakes, Marsha? Where exactly do you fit in?"

She closed her eyes and clutched the blanket around the baby. Her face contorted the same way it had while she was giving birth, the skin stretching, the teeth clenched. "Hun yah ual anomob," she spit, "hun yah ual cab Aurelie!"

Alexander tried to hold her but she resisted him.

"You! I take the knife, take my blood, to give to you, seal the pact."

"Marsha! Marsha!" He slapped her face and shook her roughly. "Marsha, are you alright?"

Her body still shaking; she had stopped speaking. The dark boy whimpered quietly beside her.

"What is it? What happened with my father?"

Marsha's body relaxed, she leaned back into the pillow. "Your father," she said, wiping her eyes in her nightgown, "Frederick, gave me an out. I was pregnant, the father was a student at a university in Mexico City. Frederick told me he'd take the child off my hands. He made it a...ritual. Made me follow him into the jungle to a tiny clearing. Made me take off my clothes, sit and watch as he removed his. Took the knife, horrible feathered knife, he cut into himself, Alex...he was sacrificing to those goddamn stone idols.

"He told me it was a secret, women didn't normally see such things. He told me I was special, an exception...strange madness, drinking balche, smoking picietl...I could remember him telling me..."Lady Crossroads", he said, "mother of new race"...and "watch!" he is screaming, "watch this sacrifice!" I wanted to leave, Palenque, the whole thing...said he'd take care of me...made me seal the pact...took me by the hand, made me kneel, took the knife and gave it to me. I couldn't! I couldn't...he took the knife and I knelt while he sliced into my thigh...not moving, not crying...blood collecting in the stone bowl. You didn't notice the scar, did you, it was so close...well here! See for yourself!"

She whipped away the covers and hoisted her nightgown. "There! There is my contract, Alexander!" She swayed with

exhaustion as Alexander touched the scar, and rocked her back to calmness. Her eyes closed, her body gentle now, after the spasms. Alexander focussed on the baby, Frederick's new son, his father's chosen son. The thought both dismayed and relieved him.

Marsha reclaimed the bundle at her side. "Your father was a lonely old man."

Alexander shook his head. "Arnett is a lonely old man."

"Your father too, Alex. That was his problem. He wanted something to love..."

"And you did?"

"No...love? No. I cared about him. He was a sick, lonely old man, he needed so much. I admired his intelligence, was grateful for his offer to help. I was...in a strange state of mind when I was in the jungle, not functioning straight..."

"But you're straight now, Marsha."

"Yes."

"And you were willing to leave your child with him?"

"It was the deal...besides, what other options did I have? Here I am, pregnant, and this man tells me he'll give my kid a good home. What would you do?"

Alexander stared at the giraffe with the quizzical felt eyes, on the pillow over her shoulder. "I'd check out the home; I think I'd fucking check out the home, Marsha! Christ, my father destroyed himself!"

Marsha put her hand to her mouth.

"I mean, where the fuck's your responsibility in all this? You're the parent. Between you and Frederick there exists a kid who shouldn't be here. You didn't give him a choice so he fought his way in, pushing in, yes, but screaming all the way. This kid is here now because of you, and you aren't even taking responsibility for where you are!"

The Jester God was giggling, pointing at Alexander. Marsha was shuddering, turning away from him, her eyes wide, holding onto the giraffe instead of the baby. Alexander defiantly moved the baby closer to her.

"He's here, Marsha. He's the one that's breathing."

He put a hand on the baby's stomach and lightly rocked the infant. "Ssshhh...", he said, "ssshhh...Marsha, listen, we have to go see Simmons, see this through. Okay?"

She nodded her head slowly.

Simmons was no longer in the hospital, they would have to call the house.

"You'll do all the talking, Marsha. In case Ed remembers me from the hospital. Keep it brief, just say you're coming, okay?"

Marsha huddled beside the phone, holding onto the receiver, the fuzz at her forehead clinging to Alexander's upper arm as

she buried her face in his sleeve.

In the taxi Alexander silently tried to rehearse what he would say to Simmons. The notes had been mailed to Montreal, Simmons could not have seen them. But what he must have seen, the transformation, the man slipping backwards. Simmons had seen Frederick Aurelie in all tenses.

Sylvie Simmons peered out the glass window on her front door, frowned when she took in Alexander and the baby with Marsha. She pulled open the door and made sweeping motions with her hand.

"Come in, come in, it's so cold out there."

She was wearing a pink dress with rosebuds on it, she was small and delicate. Her face was lined, especially around the eyes, which were brown and curious.

"I know you, you're..."

Alexander answered quickly. "Aurelie...Alexander.

The younger...middle son," he said.

She seemed unnerved for a moment, but collected herself and said, "You will wait here, please, while I prepare my husband for his visitors."

"How is he?" Marsha blurted. The woman slowed her steps momentarily, then hastened out of the room.

In the small sitting room Alexander could see evidence of Simmons' career. The artifacts he could make out, the

rebuilt vases, the Mexican weavings. At the edge of his right eye, Alexander could see the black and white photograph on the wall, Simmons, then a younger man, standing beside a twin-engined plane with another man. Although there was an awkward smile on the other's face, he had a hand slapped around Simmons' shoulders. The team.

Mrs. Simmons had re-entered quietly. "You may come in now," she said carefully, and turned to Alexander. "My husband has been expecting you."

The den was bright, long windows with small panes infusing patterned light. Simmons sat in a wheelchair disguised with a plaid blanket. His head was still bandaged, although the wrappings were now chiefly around the eye. His damaged arms were hidden in the empty folds of a dark blue shirt which flattened into streamers at the ends of the sleeves. His legs were covered.

Sylvie Simmons left the room, glancing back warily. Marsha approached Simmons and kissed his forehead. "Good to see you," she patted his shoulder. "Good to see you again, Ed." Alexander noticed that Simmons was looking at the child Marsha held in her arms, his good eye moved from the baby back to Marsha. He smiled weakly and shifted his head.

"Your little one," he said.

She nodded.

Then Simmons' eye was looking at Alexander. "Come

closer," he said, "we have to talk."

Alexander moved toward the man. Curious thing, how this man's study was lit with natural light. The patterned windows covered with frost were like large crystals; the statue of a sitting Mayan on the windowsill was framed in light. Alexander thought of the purple fluorescent, yellow, and white lights in his father's study. The hot bulbs burning into the night, into the man's skull.

"You've come about your father," Simmons said. His eye winced as he struggled to adjust a cushion by pummelling it with his back.

Alexander hastily arranged the crocheted pillow. "The journals he wrote on the site, Ed. I've been through them."

"I knew he'd been writing."

"Yes. He mailed them to himself with some of the artifacts."

"They...uhm...said things, did they?"

"Yes."

"What do you know?"

"More than you do, I expect. Do you remember, when you were in Intensive Care - granted, you were pretty heavily sedated at the time - but...my coming to see you, what happened?"

Simmons closed his eye and nodded his head slowly.

"Matapalo," he said.

"Matapalo," Alexander repeated.

"Then you realize..."

"What?"

"That what went on in the air, that I was responsible for your father's death," his voice cracked and the eye clamped tighter.

"What went on up there, Ed?"

The man concentrated on the armrest of his wheelchair, eyes open.

"You know, you never realize what you'll miss. I would, right now, like to pound my fist into the arm of this chair," he squinted, "and I can't." He shook his head. His bottom lip had disappeared into his mouth, Alexander wondered whether he was sucking himself inside.

"I am a good pilot, I've flown difficult routes before..."

"No one's questioning that, Ed."

"The Report did."

"Yes, but they never..."

"Your brother did."

"What? Harry's been here?"

Simmons coughed. "I couldn't believe you'd all make the trip one by one asking the same questions. I prayed you'd all come together."

"What kind of questions did my brother ask you?"

Simmons nodded his head in the direction of the window.

"Would you mind? I haven't got the motorized one yet, they're

still working on the special adjustments."

Alexander stared. "Oh! Sure, sorry." He pushed the wheelchair over to the window.

"Thanks," said Simmons. "So few hours of light these days." His eye seemed focussed on the frosted pattern. "Like to drum my fingers now," he murmured. "Your brother," he said, not turning around, "was very kind. He had dropped by, so he said, to set the record straight about the crash. He asked me about the markings on Frederick...oh, you needn't worry. I told him they were primitive inoculations. He didn't press me further. I figured that since he didn't seem to know about that, he probably didn't know anything about this 'other' Frederick; I figured you had a reason for leaving him in the dark, so I didn't tell him what the scars really were. So, then he walked around the room, touched a few things, and then he grilled me...on weather conditions, aircraft maintenance, my eyes!" The eye clamped shut again. "My eyes."

"Ed, I know it wasn't the plane, wasn't your fault."

"Do you?" the wheelchair shook. "Turn me around!"

Alexander whirled the chair and was staring at Simmons.

"Do you really, young Aurelie? Just how do you know that, goddamnit, when I don't! Tell me that!"

Alexander gave Simmons a wide eyed frown.

"We were in the Aztec, Frederick and I, we were the only

ones there!"

"The Aztec?"

"Our craft," he said in a quieter tone. "We'd flown a Piper Aztec since getting rid of the Twin Otter a couple of years back."

Frederick on board an Aztec, Alexander thought, and all for the sake of his Mayans. No, you weren't the only ones there, Ed. You probably missed the Vaudevillian in the engine.

"We were flying through some weather, Frederick was behind me. That was strange because he often sat beside me in the copilot seat. We'd taken out the fifth and sixth seats for freight, so he was in the second row, right behind me."

Simmons' voice was becoming detached, professional. He continued in an authoritative monotone. "I was flying VMC/VFR, 'Visual Meteorological Conditions', you understand, 'Visual Flight Rules.' I am a good pilot," the voice sounded almost hollow, as though the flat streamers at the edges of the sleeves had continued up until the entire body was but strands and streamers, the voice echoing out of the Empty Space?

Alexander shuddered; a voice in a bandage.

"I was flying 'See and Be Seen' rules, but this takes ceiling and visibility unlimited, and I didn't have it. My forward visibility was well below five miles, I was flying in and out of cloud..."

"Why, Ed? Surely..."

"I know! I know! Don't you think I know I should have been flying Instruments? IFR Regulations were called for, and I didn't...switch over."

"So why didn't the Report find you at fault?"

Simmons turned away from Alexander. "'Cause...I don't know, technicality. It's very difficult to lay blame in these cases. Intermittent bad weather, it's a pilot's judgement..."

"And you have, haven't you?"

"What?"

"Judged yourself."

Simmons' lip disappeared again. "Should have known better," he murmured. "I was in a hurry. I wanted Frederick out of there. I'd taken on extra fuel in the wing tip tanks so we could get a fair distance on Long Range Cruising. And then I fly smack into that damned weather..."

Alexander looked over at Marsha. She was watching Simmons intently, the baby in her arms. Alexander nodded at Simmons.

"So, Ed...you flew your Visual Rules and you hit cloud and..."

But Simmons had turned to Marsha, was watching the brown child. Simmons' voice sounded not so much hollow as parched, parched like Frederick's must have been as he chanted in the ruins.

"Oh God, Alex, I wish I knew what happened. I keep reliving

parts of it, the final few moments in the air. They seem to go on forever when I think of them, yet I can never remember all the details.

"It was getting dark. I don't like flying in bad weather but sometimes you have to. It wasn't even all that late, actually, but Frederick had stalled and stalled and when we finally got going I was impatient, and frightened...I don't know... strange. Once we entered the weather, my wing lights started reflecting off the cloud. I should have gone Instruments then and there, but I kept taking her lower to try and get under it. I lost my point of reference for a moment, those damned beams were flashing back at us..."

Vaudeville! Alexander cursed. "And then?"

Simmons paused. "And then your father, Alexander...he was ill, as you know, he..."

"Did he say anything? What was he doing?"

"He...he was ill, he talked incessantly from behind me somewhere. Babbling, mostly, he was chanting to himself, about Palenque, cursing about me. He said a few things I did catch, references to the Palenque site, but a couple of things that stood out. He kept talking about a son...I didn't know which of you, Alex. In fact, I wondered why he kept mentioning a child. I couldn't figure it out until you, Marsha, came to see me at the hospital. This is Frederick's child," he tilted

his head toward the baby.

Alexander could hardly see the child for all the flannel blanket. Frederick's child. Alexander had been an afterthought, but this child?

Marsha tried a smile. "This is Frederick's chosen son, Ed. The child is Mexican. His name is Hochan-ek."

Simmons pressed his lips together and nodded. "That's the name he kept mentioning. That name, and yours, Alex."

Alexander stiffened. "Why do you say that?" he breathed.

"He did. It's like he kept alternating your names. Then he would babble about Palenque again...you must have noted, somewhere in his writings, the names Shield Pacal and Chan-Bahlum?"

Alexander nodded.

"Those names, too. He kept muttering them all to himself. I can't help but conclude he'd made some correlation between Pacal and Pacal's son, and himself and this son here."

"But why Hochan-ek? Why take the risk on a...sorry, Marsha, but on a come-by-chance kid and a woman who might or might not show up with it? Why if..."

Simmons' eye grinding clear blue into him. One eye, like a searchlight.

"Why, Alex? Maybe he had to. He went on and on about how he didn't need any of us, there, anywhere. But he was waiting for a son. Come-by-chance, I don't know."

"Did he say anything about the family, my...uhm... family?"

Simmons grimaced as he moved his leg into a more comfortable position. "As I say, most of it was just delirium. He was totally exhausted, weakened. But he mentioned all of you at different points," he cast an embarrassed glance at Marsha. "Emily too," he added.

"What did he say about mother?" Alexander asked, incredulous.

"Let me see...he was remembering some scene, moment perhaps. He talked about walking with her, or something, on a ridge at the perimeter of something. Sorry I can't remember, that's when things started going crazy up there."

"Ed, what's the last thing you remember my father saying?"

Simmons took a breath of air, letting it out slowly. "I'm not sure. He'd been rambling and I'd glance back every now and again. His body frightened me, Alex. He was scarred and sick, he looked terrible. I don't know. And my lights flashing back in my eyes, the nose light coming right back on me as I'm taking her lower. Frederick chuckling...yes, he was chuckling to himself! His dry voice saying things like 'Check your artificial horizon, Edward.' There's an artificial horizon on the instrument panel. 'Check the horizon, Edward,' and laughing. 'We're flying See and Be

Seen', he said, 'and here you are all mixed up in the blinking clouds.'"

The baby began to cry and Marsha held him out to Alexander.

Alexander folded the blanket around the boy and rocked him gently. "Quiet," he said, "quiet."

"And then, then Alex, he pulled himself forward, I didn't know what he was doing. 'Watching the horizon, Edward,' he said. He distracted me, I took my eyes away, the plane feathered and banked suddenly, it was so fast, Frederick grabbed on to me, my neck as he fell sideways. He began screaming about the ceiba tree, the Mayan Holy Tree, screaming something about the Matapalo. It was like he was yelling in anger, but then in horror, 'Matapalo! Killing wrong tree! Center of universe, destroying center!' Then I felt pain at my head and we went down, I guess..., " Simmons motioned for Alexander to bring the baby closer. The boy had calmed down. "I am sorry for him," Simmons nodded to the child.

Marsha stood beside Simmons now; she had her hand on his shoulder. "But how can you say it's your fault, Ed? Sounds to me like you tried everything."

"Because I feel responsible, dear. He was ill, I knew it. I guess I shouldn't have forced him to leave the site, but I wanted to get him out of there, get help. I thought it would

work, I should never..."

"Shouldn't! Wouldn't!" Alexander flung the words. "Ed, you're responsible only for yourself. You could not have helped my father. There was nothing to help. For him, there was nothing at all, I mean, you're responsible only to yourself!"

Alexander felt the baby slipping and juggled it frantically. Marsha bolted over and grabbed it; Simmons shook his head.

"That's not true, Alexander."

Simmons had no idea how Frederick felt. If he only knew he wouldn't think so highly of his dear departed colleague. Alexander looked at the broken man. He wouldn't have to live with this guilt. Simmons and Frederick Aurelie, the two figures in the black and white photograph, the team. If he just knew how little it all meant to Frederick in the end, he wouldn't...

Vaudeville began cackling. Tell him, pushing Alexander's shoulder blades, the stage light waiting, flashing off the smoke clouds in the crowded hall. It will make him understand, They grin in approbation. It will fill this limbless thing with knowledge.

"Ed...my father, uh...he wasn't just sick..."

And he will live out the rest of his life a mere bauble of flesh, without even the residue of friendship - complete, They chortle. The light burning into Alexander's forehead.

Plane circling center-front over Vaudeville Gods in the crowd. Come on, Aurelie, They taunt. Tell him.

"What are you trying to say, Alex?"

"Just that..."

The Mayan Jester God was poised, ready to fire at Simmons.

"No!" Alexander shouted.

Simmons jerked his head back.

Beams firing from navigation lights, nose light, red strobe light at tail, stall-warning horn sounding through the air, sky bright around the plane and a pilot grin on bloodied lips. Horns and cackling, and a single man silhouetted against the sky, squinting, shaking his head, shaking his head.

No more! Fucking Vaudevillians! We aren't mannikins to be brutalized with every nod, with every blast and salvo. Deranged Squatters, no Empty Space for you. Get out of my gut, get out of my skull...internally deformed, like father, like son, eh? Well, this is my régime! I will choose my partners, I will choose my gods! Get out of my skull, frigid entertainers.

It was Marsha who stood beside him, winced as he squeezed hard on her forearm, held on to the baby as he pulled her roughly toward him. He was whispering in her ear, scarcely daring to move. They were all around him shouting now, angry, and he was whispering over the racket in his skull, "Climbing

snakes now, Marsha. Hold on to me." Laurelie's eyes in Marsha's skull looking into him, understanding, holding. Quiet, quiet, the quiet of Retreat over spread of No Man's Land. Quiet, damned deafening lull, lull...

Simmons was eyeing Alexander fearfully. His wife had run into the room, her face quick and hostile.

"You were not to excite him, you were not to shout!" she shouted.

"Ssshhh," Simmons ordered. "It's alright, dear," and watching Alexander.

Sweater smelled like stale clothes and baby odor wafting through. Tasting hair fuzz at Marsha's forehead, sweat on edge of scalp. "Thank you," he whispered through the fuzz.

When he pulled away he found that he was holding the child. He didn't know how it managed to stay up between them, how it had not been squashed or dropped.

Alexander looked from Mrs. Simmons to her husband. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was...I had wanted to tell you, Ed... that my father thought a lot of you as well. It's...just that it's all kind of hard to assimilate, you know?"

Simmons' face relaxed, his head nuzzled the hand of his wife, resting at his neck. "Your father, he was not...had he not been ill, Alex. Poor Frederick, he believed it all! The

rites, the prophecies. He believed the Fifth Earth would soon end, and he wanted to contribute to the Sixth. I almost think that's why he was talking about you, Alex. He wanted you to survive the Fifth Earth. You're the youngest, you'd live 'till 2011."

Alexander shook his head slowly. "I was the youngest," he said.

And he is little and his father is at the head of the table, smiling and taking hold of the knife. The steaming golden turkey is sliced, the plates are passed around. His father is lifting up a glass of deep red liquid and is chanting something...the little boy is peering through his empty water glass as the man's face and body become blurred. And the hand with the red liquid moves around the table, stopping opposite each person. The boy hears the chant over and over, "Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas," and then his father's voice trailing, "And God bless us, everyone." And his mother gives the man a squeeze, and through the blur of the glass their faces meet.

"You could have discredited my father, Ed."

Simmons shrugged, waving invisible hands on the ends of streamers. "Why? Practically speaking, it would have discredited my own work. And personally," he paused, "personally, it would have disgraced our friendship. No, I try to think of Frederick

as he was in the past."

In the past. Yes, Frederick in the past. He had found the seams between the tenses, the other side of Ruz's wall. Why couldn't he have left the past alone instead of dragging it into the present? "And all for the sake of the future," Alexander said aloud, shaking his head.

Simmons tried to interpret this. "Yes, I expect it is, Alex. Of course, you know that, being a writer. Our memories are all we have. Well, that and a bit of imagination, I guess. No, I want to retain fond memories of Frederick; he helped shape my life."

Quite a shape you have there, Ed - Vaudeville harpooned. Alexander could hear Them in the distance, snorting and laughing.

"That's a very decent thing to say, Ed."

I will finish with You later, he mouthed at the Squatters.

All the way back to the house, they sat silently in the back of the taxi. Marsha was preoccupied with the baby, which drooled and sputtered its way through an infant dream. Alexander was watching the child sleeping away most of its life. He thought of Laurelie Leclerc, the character, the woman who inspired the character, her words as she hesitantly went among people:

They do not know me so they clear a path when I walk, or watch me from their windows, wag tongues and fingers at their youngsters not safe behind the glass.

He thought of them all, the people and the characters, his thirty-five years of peering at people through glass.

The infant breathed softly, in a deep sleep. It could afford the time, he thought. For the kid, the present and the future were greater than the past. Alexander's own hourglass, he knew, was no longer necessarily top-heavy. He expected it was about halfway at this point, the future dribbling vortex through the passage, the future settling sifted in the past. But it was the thin squeeze of glass in the center, that narrow possibility of the present, which was beginning to fascinate him. An amorphous, multifarious future was maneuvered into the tight confines of the present, forced to take on a shape, until it trickled through and merged again with the past.

Arnett was asleep in the living room, one leg dangling provocatively over the side of the sofa. His brown coat embellished the armchair, his battered, oval-shaped shoes paraded the floor. He had made himself at home.

Marsha and Alexander tiptoed through the room and into the kitchen. They closed the door and Alexander put on the kettle. Marsha loosened her green blouse and pushed the material away from her breast. She lifted the child, holding his head, and placed the mouth at her nipple. The baby sucked intently.

"He was hungry," she smiled briefly.

"And I'm exhausted," Alexander said. He looked from the smile to the baby, put the teapot on the stove and moved closer to Marsha. Something made him reach out and lightly trace the outline of her other breast. She watched his fingers.

"What are you going to do, Marsha?"

She shrugged. "I'll probably have to hunt up my family," she murmured, patting the baby's back.

He touched the tiny fingers. They still grasped with infant force, but this child who had screamed his way in was already beginning to relax with the adults.

"Are you going to keep him?"

She frowned. "I don't know. I didn't want him." She looked at the squinting eyes, the tiny mouth. "I mean, this isn't exactly a primo situation, is it? But hell, I can't just leave him somewhere, not now...it's not his fault. Going to go down and do the paperwork, make him 'official.' Alex, I'll manage somehow, until something comes along. People do manage, I expect."

"Are you thinking of looking for the father?"

She smiled wistfully and shook her head. "That was never one of the options. It's funny. The kid had a father, then he almost had another father, then...well, he'll just have to make the best of it with me, I guess."

Alexander passed his hand over the fuzz that crowned the baby's head. "Still, it's good to know your father," he mused. "But it doesn't matter where the kid comes from, as long as you can love it," he said. "Do you love him?"

Marsha smiled. "You sound like we're both in Grade 1 together. Do you love Frederick, do you love him, do you love me?"

He shrugged sheepishly. "Hochan-ek, Scraped Star, you going to call him that?"

She trembled slightly. "Too difficult. Too many memories."

"You don't want the memories?"

She held his arm. "Whatever Eddie said, it's good to let some of them go."

"What will you call him?" he studied the baby's forehead.

"I don't know. I was thinking I might name him Arnett. Do you think the old man would mind?"

Alexander smiled and shook his head.

"Arnett...Millar," she tried it out.

"Mallow," he corrected her, patting her shrinking stomach.

The baby had burped its way to complacency, and Marsha stood up to take it upstairs. Alexander caught her gently. He put an arm around her shoulder and hugged her.

"You don't mind if I check in on the little guy every now and then?" The infant peered at Alexander through eye slits.

"I always kind of wanted a little brother." He watched as she

stepped through the living room.

"A brother?" she asked quietly, her head tilted; she walked into the hall.

Alexander laughed at Arnett's languid pose on the sofa, went over and nudged him.

"Eh? What's that?" Arnett's grizzled face moved; he scratched his thigh. "Oh, it's you. I was wonderin' when you'd get back. You had a visitor today."

"Who?"

"Well, a very respectable lookin' gent comes up, says he's related to ye. You can understand why I didn't right off believe that. But he convinced me he was yer brother."

"Harry came here? What did he say?"

"Well, mostly he just stared. What's wrong with this crew, they never seen an old man before?"

"And he said?"

"Well, he's another strange one. Asked me who I was, of course. Not a bad question to be grilled on at my age."

Alexander paused to consider the effect Arnett's presence would have had on Horace. "What did you tell him?"

"Told him I was yer baby sitter," Arnett said, launching into a sputtering cough. "But ye know, kid, he was real unnatural about that, too. So I told him that you, the missus and the little tyke had gone to see that Simmons guy. Hope ye didn't mind my tellin' that."

Alexander was thinking of Horace's questions to Simmons, and his questions at the funeral. "How do you think he took it?"

"He...well, let's see...I could tell he didn't believe me, so I told him to search the house if he wanted."

The journals. "Did he?"

"Nope. He went over to the phone, plugged it in the wall and said he'd be callin' - soon!" Arnett sneezed, the tremor shaking his entire body. He nodded in the direction of the fireplace. "That thing work?"

Alexander glanced at the fireplace, remembering crackling brightness, stockings hung along the mantle, hot tingly drinks and Christmas carols. "It used to work," he said, "but it hasn't been used in years. It used to work just fine."

"Should get it goin' again; get it workin' like a hot damn."

"Arnett?"

"Eh?"

"I have a favour to ask you."

Arnett straightened up and squinted at Alexander. "Name it, kid."

"Would you be willing to mind this house for a little while? We don't know what we're going to do with it yet, and I have to go away for a while..."

"Goin' away?" Arnett mouthed.

"Yes and..."

"Me take care of this huge place? You must be jokin'!"

"All it would entail is making sure any mail that's still coming for my father is collected; keeping the lights on, like that."

Arnett grunted. "Stuff still comin' for yer old man? He's been dead now fer...sorry, kid...guess it's possible he'd still be gettin' stuff. They hunted me up for a bill once, took three years!"

"Arnett, the house?"

"I don't know. It's a hell of a responsibility to heave on an old man."

"You could handle it, Arnett."

Arnett shifted uncomfortably. "Okay...alright, I'll do it. I'll watch the place for ye. But ye better square it with yer brother and that nun, okay?"

Alexander nodded.

"Where ye goin' to, anyway?"

Alexander stood at the door. "I'll let you know as soon as I do." As he left the room, he called back, "Oh, by the way, Marsha's decided to name the baby after you, so I guess that makes you the honorary grandfather." Alexander smiled at the confused, then delighted grunts coming from the sofa.

All the way up the stairs the street light coming through the window on the landing outlined his mother's samplers. The light shone on the glass as Alexander traced his forefinger

over the words. Her chants against Vaudeville, he thought. He waited, and counted. The searchlight would be passing by. He didn't know who was controlling the beam; for the moment it didn't matter. Feeling embroidery through glass, impossible. The glass in between was like the time in between, you could still make out the picture, but you could not feel the texture. Like the spotted yellow plastic over photos in his wallet. A young man with his arm around a woman, the man in a t-shirt, the woman with a lopsided smile. Wait a moment, Frederick Aurelie. I will settle things with them, then I will settle things with you.

Alfreda's room was dark. Alexander peered in. "You asleep, Marsha?"

He heard a scrunching of blankets.

"Hmmm? Oh, what's that, Alexander?"

His eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and in the faint light coming through the window he saw a silhouette of her face against the pillow, her hair in waves around her head.

"You want to go back to your family?"

Marsha shifted toward him. "What kind of question is that?"

"Believe me, it's legit. I just don't want you doing anything you'll regret. Do you want to go back?"

She lay perfectly still.

"Marsha, I know that with Christmas coming on...but if

you need time, you could stay..."

"I want to go."

"You feel strong enough to travel?"

She nodded.

"Where do they live, your family? Where are they?"

"My parents are in Connecticut."

"I'll take you there."

"You? Why?"

Alexander sighed. Because of his father, because of the baby. Because her grey eyes bothered Alexander with their ambiguity, their likeness to those of Laurelie. A swirling, gliding lady, a steely, gentle woman. Because you confuse me.

"Look Marsha, I just want to make sure you and the kid are alright, okay? Look, I'm sorry things didn't work out for you. Wish I could say I'd keep my father's bargain, but I can't. Wish he'd understood that," he murmured. "Kids can't always honour their parents' promises...but they can make their own. I can do something, Marsha, and I'd like to. There's a settlement of the estate coming, and I want to set up something for the boy."

"Alex, that's not..."

"Please Marsha, I want to." Alexander paused. "I...I guess that inasmuch as this was to be Frederick's child, my... uh...brother, he deserves..."

She felt around for his hand and held it. "Thank you,

Alex," she said again. "Your father would have been pleased."

"It doesn't matter," Alexander said slowly. "That doesn't matter, anyway."

She pulled him under the covers. He was shivering with the cold, or something. The baby in the crook of her arm, and he arched around her. Bodies accommodating bodies, he thought, and touched Marsha's hair. He moved a finger along the nape of her neck. "You sure you're healed enough to travel?" he breathed into her hair.

She turned toward him, his cold body, and took him in her arms. His stiff limbs pulled her closer, her milk-filled breasts pressing softly against him.

"Are you sure you are?" she spoke tenderly.

Alexander caressed her, moving his hands over her body which was already reverting from mother to girl, her hips and thighs smooth. Only the stretching where the child had lived, where the child had lived...an Empty Space that Vaudeville would try to claim.

He looked and she smiled as he held her. He felt himself embracing her, all of her, the girl body with the woman's breasts, the lullabye, her eyes. So much, there was no room for the Sad Comedians, They didn't fit here.

And he was laughing; so hard it came out choking, sputtering. Tears on her neck, in her hair. She ran her hand

through his hair as he cried with laughter.

Arnett snored in the living room as the phone rang in the kitchen. Alexander ran, taking the stairs by twos.

"Hello!" he coughed for breath.

"Alex?"

"Yes...oh, hello."

"Alex, I'm glad you're there. I stopped by earlier today. I was worried, neither Alfreda nor I had heard from you."

"Yes...uh, sorry, Harry. I've been trying to finish things up, couldn't be disturbed."

"Which doesn't explain the old guy I found there. Alfreda mentioned an old man - are you running a halfway-house over there, or what?"

Alexander pondered. "You might say that. Uh, actually Harry, Arnett is helping me out. He's an old friend of mine and I'm going to have him stay at the house for a while... 'till we settle what we're going to do with it, okay?"

Horace, take your time. Gather together your understanding, your decorum, the way you'd always apologize when I said something off-colour to your date, or mine.

"Well, if he's a friend...but, do you think he's all there, Alex? I'm sorry for the way that sounds..."

"Arnett is all there, Harry."

"Oh, because when I was..."

"Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Could you come over tomorrow with Alfie? I want to talk to you both before I leave."

"Leave? Alex, you're not leaving! We haven't even seen you! What about father's papers, and..."

"It's about that. It's about father's papers. Can you come?"

"Well, I guess so, Alex, but..."

"Good. You'll tell Alfie? And we'll see you then, sometime in the afternoon."

What can I tell them, father, what can I tell them of you? They will be here tomorrow, I must get rid of these tonight. Alexander closed the door to the study and sat down once more with the journals.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS : AUGUST 25:

Much left...ready. Simmons came to find me, take me back. Do not want to leave. He is stronger now, in his body. Will take me if I don't eat, says. Will take me if I try to sacrifice. Cannot. Too weak. Where are my orchids, matapalos?

Talks. Always talks of old things. Alfreda... Horace...Sandor...talk of work. Of Dr. Frederick Aurelie.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS : AUGUST 28:

Rest! He expects me to rest. To "build myself up." What did he think I was doing? Building. Building!

Fool. Jerking, pecking motions, pecking bird, without the grace of the quetzal. Asked him to find me some matapalos. Says it's obsession with me. Flower can kill tree much stronger than itself. Matapalo.

Wants to start sending things back. Extra equipment, notes, artifacts. These notes I will include with the reference texts I am sending back. He must not see these notes, nullify even these records. I will play him, leave with him - yes, even that - Simmons will never return to contaminate this site.

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS : AUGUST 29:

I can feel him watching me from the Temple of the Sun. Why doesn't he look at the back wall? It explains; I am so weary of trying to be understood. On the Shield, the Sun God is portrayed as a Jaguar. This is the representation of war, sacrifice, the Underworld. And the two figures on the altar are Shield Pacal and Chan-Bahlum. Pacal on the left in his knotted death robes. On the right, Chan-Bahlum, preparing to inherit. It is my son who will inherit.

My sons. Horace, born to befriend Emily. I remember. A good boy, helped her in my absence. I had my Sandor, full of energy, questions, always alert. I admired that, he would have made a fine successor. But he dismissed all I had to give him, all I could have taught him. For what? His other path, a life of indulgence, a lazy mind! I deplore this.

With the others it is forgiveable, with Sandor... ALEXANDER! So I named you! And like Alexander you had the choice of worlds, whole worlds! You exchanged this for certain destruction, along with the rest of the Fifth Earth.

I am on the threshold of the Sixth Earth, I have no time for you. I loved you and you betrayed me. I expect there is a pattern in such things.

Learning the flesh, Frederick, learning the bones.

We're always fighting tenses, and yet are we so different?

F.A. PALENQUE : TEMPLE OF THE INSCRIPTIONS : AUGUST 20:

He is coming for me, Pacal. Again and again these lesser ones destroy what we envision. Someday they will further subvert this site. I understand these archaeologists. At some point the holy ground will be forever ravaged.

I am ill, he will let me alone as we travel. I must act on what options are left to me. Hun yah ual cab, 'Enemy of the World', I will destroy you! Behind you in the plane, Ed. Like the Matapalo tightening on the tree, I will squeeze the life from your scrawny bird-like neck.

Simmons thought he was responsible, you mean...

The journal was blank for several pages, Alexander flipped frantically. The entries were no longer dated, matapalos bloomed from the margins into the center, entwined the letters that formed the words. Lines were jotted here and there along the sides, or diagonally scribbled into the middle.

Simmons...go ahead and try to take me back. I will do the rest. Hah! The rest we both needed, right, Ed? You said we needed one. Well, very soon. Very soon.

End of Fifth Earth. Oh, it is end of Fifth Earth. The Sklower predictions correct. On December 24, 2011, the angles of elongation of the planets will be:

☉ Sun	0 degrees
☿ Mercury	26.49 degrees
♄ Saturn	63.79 degrees
♂ Mars	98.44 degrees
♅ Pluto	-3.08 degrees
♀ Venus	-35.17 degrees
♆ Neptune	-60.00 degrees
♁ Uranus	-90.66 degrees
♃ Jupiter	-118.84 degrees

This will do it. They were all correct. Nostradamus, Mother Shipton, Edgar Cayce, the Mayans. It is all ridiculously clear!

On December 24, 2011, the planets indicate:

Mercury: we will experience polar shift, causing violent accidents and upheavals.

Venus: violent auto accidents and the perversion of love to hatred.

Mars: Mars reads blindness and elemental violence.

Jupiter: earthquakes; destruction by fire.

Saturn: the sea will react with force.

Uranus: (This is characteristically Fifth Earthian) - Uranus reads self-destruction, death by fright.

Neptune: upheavals, volcanic action, earthquakes. The family will psychically fall apart.

Pluto: violent accidents; violent deaths.

And the Sun reads: FIRE.

Purification. Hol-can-be has given me hope, will give me Hochan-ek. And Hochan-ek will survive and lead the survivors, if there are any.
Save the few that can be saved.

"We come only to sleep
We come only to dream
It is not true, it is not true
That we come to this earth to live
We come as grass in the springtime
With the flourishing
With the opening of petals
But our body is more like the rosevine
It blossoms and then grows dry."

(a Nahua poet)

Leaving what you have lived for, leaving what you love.
To love, curious emotion, destroys more than it heals.
Sandor, whom I once loved; my wife Emily, soft delicate creature, I recall, a smile somewhat asymmetrical. Shy,

daring motions, body of alert desire. So long ago, such things are a world ago. Traipsing through my mind into the corner of my eye, I see her still on rare occasions, as now, when it is goodbye to the Fifth Earth.

The sun is setting on the ruins, Pacal. And we will leave you for the round, the other world. Sleep silently, Pacal, be still, Shield Pacal. The Earth Monster on the sepulcher, the jade bead in your speechless mouth. Soon I will join you in the jaws of the Earth, perhaps at last to come to know the Terror of the Love.

Dust on shoulder blades from wall of stone. Head is full of heat and Gods, Gods so hot They burn in forehead, sloping, hot like burning stone.

Bronze men see what is before them, jungle in eyes flowing green waving vines. Shaman is calling and chanting to men of Palenque, Holy Palenque, most holy of cities. Where are the people who worship their Gods?

Shade, it is cool along neck, along shoulders, cautiously moving through paths in the jungle. Shaman is calling, grows fainter grows quiet as sounds of the jungle alive in their ears pull them further along to where paths end in green walls and dust on their skin becomes dust on their bones.

The man with the flower looks up at the Palace as the Vulture flies circles around the tall tower. Black Vulture, the portent of Holy Palenque, circles the orchid in the palm of his hand. Hieroglyphs compute the time, great stelae, dusty stones of time. The man nods in silence, aware of the hour,

though his wrist watch had dropped between chinks in the stones.

He is thinking. He pauses on the pathway for breath.

That it would be here, that I would come here to Palenque.

A scourger of this soil taken in embrace by Lord Shield Pacal.

My hairless head reveals no sloped forehead, I am conspicuous in my clothes. The old plaid shirt, worn thin...I won't miss it...pants slide so easily down my legs, gather around the ankles like the sepals of a flower...skin so soft as I slough off this clothing, shreds of fabric, pieces of rag.

I have the whole world here. Why did they not want to share it with me? Emily shrugs away, off in the other time. The others still live in the round world. My children, my descendants, tell me, where are you going? Alfreda. Alfreda, you wander past windows forever. My dear girl, where did you first hear of the word that took you away to where no one can find you? I remember. You never look up when your god looks at you.

I am coming, Pacal. The steps up to the Temple are difficult to climb. Yet, for you, all is rest here. Where does your son rest...Chan-Bahlum, under which Temple is he buried? It is so hard a thing to lose a child...once I had a son named Horace...he would watch me so carefully, adjusting how wide his wide eyes should be...his cautious gaze no match for my glare, every glance

was measured, every nod was narrow.

Pacal, I know waiting is hardest of all...you had three sons, Chan-Bahlum, Hok and Xoc...and I had Horace, I had Sandor... and now I am waiting for Hochan-ek.

Air so heavy here...legs weakening. Air is like hands pressing me...air holds me up as I descend. Outside it is different. I lie down outside with my face in the dust, get up with dust clinging still to my skin. A dusty planet, Sandor... perhaps, but not here...do you remember, Sandor, I told you of this place...these musty walls, dark trickling walls so close on either side...to enter the outer burial room...the grotto... you do remember, don't you...stalagmite statues...

Oh...I have clutched this flower too tightly, it is wilting in my hand...Sandor, why did you run to the jungle? There are snakes on the trails, paths ridden with snakes! You fool of a son...

Press face against stone, feel Palenque on your skin...press push forehead against stone damn you feel it, bones and flesh accommodating here at the forehead in your brain Sandor! Forehead bent, head filled with hieroglyphs.

Pacal, they put iron bars between me and your tomb. Frederick Aurelie has been closer, has touched this sepulcher lid the archaeologist Aurelie has seen inside the sarcophagus and archaeologist

Aurelie...on this side of the bars Frederick waits...waits for his son, waits for the Night Journey...they have roped you off, bolted you in, these scourgers of soil...

We wait, we wait together...for the Sixth Earth...our computations correct, as always...we count vigesimal, dot bar and shell listen to sounds of our people around us as they chip our great stories into the long stones...I can wait here with you...body a white thing, except bruises glowing, bruises blue-green like ceiba, yax holy colour blue-green like maize bruises blue-green like jade...a bruised breathing beast will rest with the father listen for sounds as we wait for the son...patient, Pacal, I know...Aurelie taught me...we wait...we wait together...then I will make way for my son, just as you did, Pacal...Shield Pacal, please embrace me this pain is severe and you know as I do my Night Journey is near...with this knife, oh my Lord oh Great Gods with this knife I...love Thee...I...God...give Thee...my bones and my flesh...

Somewhere on Pluto a conference was hastily being arranged. The dressing room lights around the speaker's chair were forgotten, and candy-based pop bottles exploded on their own, out of synchronization with the slapstick gestures. The Vaudeville Gods stumbled in, surprised and blinking. Many were half-dressed,

red firemens' suspenders framing white buttocks, hurriedly zipping flies, grabbing shirts, groping for chairs.

Ruth, the sand-bottomed clown, wearing a gaudy yellow polka-dot sun suit, was playing in a sandbox in the corner of the room. The Mayan Jester God was agitated; his contingent was not doing well. Alexander looked through the throng for his father. The Jester God and he spotted each other, they were both looking for Frederick. Alexander stared, then grinned. "No chance," he mouthed, and brushed the creature aside. His father was not there, this must be causing the commotion.

The Gods were bullying one another for seats, there was much hair pulling and sticking out of tongues. Alexander was amazed - he could look at Them now, unperturbed. The speaker was a fat clown who pounded a spiked gavel into a piece of tenderloin. Alexander wondered why They didn't use a mime and save on the piece of meat. But the mime, he noted, was over in the corner seducing the sand-bottomed clown with invisible charms.

There were questions from the floor, indignant shouts, farts, tears from the sad-faced clown, groans from the sandbox.

Alexander saw his father enter the room; behind him walked Simmons. The Mayan Jester God shrieked with delight when he saw Frederick, drooled and cackled when he saw Simmons with him.

Attention was riveted to the thin, bald man passing out flowers to the entire assembly. The orchids he held in outstretched hospitality to the Gods, who looked bemused and pensive. Two of Them put the flowers in their hair, admiring Themselves in the reflections of one anothers' eyes. Others put them in lapel holes, replacing the plastic squirt-flowers that had grown there. Still others ripped off their ragged costumes and inserted the stems into one anothers' orifices. The place was in a frenzy.

Vines like snakes across the floor, and Ruth - he signalled to her to climb the snakes, pull herself up on the vines. There was no sense of recognition in her eyes. He took one more look at Ruth, wrapped in an impossible embrace and sucking madly on the blossom of the orchid, and turned his back.

His father stood in front of him, awkwardly smiling. He reached for Alexander's hand. Alexander prepared to cringe at the palmed form. It was stiff and cold. Alexander noticed that this process, this shaking of hands, was horizontal. Here they were not stalagmites and stalactites. vertically yearning. They were the same size, on the same plane at last.

"On the same plane," Alexander said, and he and his father both laughed. The stiff limbs melted into hands.

Frederick held out the last flower to the Mayan Jester God, which stared fixedly at him, curved tongue flicking defiantly.

It backed away from the flower and whacked it from Frederick's hand. It tried warning the other Gods, screaming at Them to throw the blossoms away, but it was too late. The plants had begun to entwine Them.

"Matapalo!" the Jester God shrieked. But it had begun.

Lights, lights and fanfare, flying Aztec sounding horn and one specific searchlight on the men named Aurelie. Light and plane circling wider circumferences wider arcs heading for the artificial horizon. Alexander's father looked dismayed as he saw the Jester God tearing for the door.

"I'll take care of it," Alexander said. Dr. Aurelie looked up at the plane, at his son, and nodded. He looked down at his empty hands, the flowers gone.

Without the orchids, his father grew fragile, stoop-shouldered. Alexander took his father by the hand and led him over to Simmons. Simmons smiled and held out both arms in welcome, stared at Alexander with two good eyes.

"My father," Alexander said, letting go of the hand.

Frederick pressed his hand up against the translucent film that had begun to separate them. My son, he mouthed silently.

Arnett in the living room, Marsha upstairs. I must do it outside. There was only the Mayan Jester God left. Alexander could see its indented forehead, the curving forms at the mouth,

he could see it seething, smoldering. It lashed its tongue angrily.

Alexander picked up the journals and carried them into the kitchen. The house was silent and dark. He opened the door and took what he thought he needed out onto the back porch. There was very little wind, the birds on the clothesline hardly moved. Alexander picked up the heavy desk lighter he had brought with him and lifted it to the edge of the notebook. The lighter sparked and flickered.

"Damn you!" he cursed and manipulated the wick. It lit.

Flames licked at the leather cover even as the Mayan God pulsed with its tongue. Fire flayed the notebook, peeling away layers of the cover like sacrificial skin. The Jester God groaned.

"I will finish you," Alexander said.

But he could not. The treated pages of the field journal would not burn. The books smoldered and smoked, the pages darkened, but would not burn. Alexander watched the red lines dying on the edges of the books. A pale, dying light, not the fluorescent lights that bored into the pores of his father's head, but these small rude flames. Primitive light, primitive heat. He stared at the darkened books, then scraped some snow off the porch and smothered the dying flames.

He is asking his father why the dry ice burns if it is supposed to be ice. He holds his sore finger in his other hand

and rocks it slowly. Harry is mad at him 'cause of the ball, and now his father is mad 'cause he's hurt himself. The boy nudges his father's elbow.

"How come?"

The man looks away from his papers spread out on the desk. Funny checked paper with coloured lines and numbers drawn on them. The man's face is looking at him, the glasses are pushed up the nose to where they balance, somehow, on the top of his head. The man lifts the boy up and sits him on his lap.

"Because," his father says, looking intently at the boy's throbbing finger, "things are not always what we think they are." The boy smells the pipe odor and clings to his father's shirt. The man examines the finger.

"Is it still hurting, or can you help me?"

The man passes the boy a sheet of paper and some coloured pencils. "Make something," the man says, "fill up all the empty spaces with colour."

The man pats the boy's shoulder as he wriggles off the lap and flops to the floor with the paper. As he sprawls on the floor drawing his patterns he looks up at the wooden desk and sees at work his father's shiny head.

The Jester God was leaving. The other Gods were already gone. Alexander had no doubt that They were still around somewhere. They would inevitably set Themselves up on some other

dull, dusty planet. Squatters were like that.

Alexander picked up the books with their charred covers and entered the house, closing the door to the smell of smoke. He retrieved his tote bag from upstairs and returned to the study. He would have to keep the books until he could figure out what to do with them. He pushed the journals into the tote bag; they took up over half the available space.

Travel light, you said, but I cannot. I have to cart this around with me. Here I am in the middle of my life, and I have to cart you around with me. Is this what you meant, Frederick? Continuity. This is what you meant by the quote on the front of the last volume, the quote I have only partially burnt away:

...the new deities who in the same moment will take over the burden of time will carry it on their backs until, overcome with fatigue, they arrive at another place of rest which is the completion of one cycle and the beginning of another. Understanding thus the measures of time as repose-completion, one of the roots from which the ideas of cycles is derived may be perceived. These are unending series of periods with moments that are at once endings and beginnings.

- León-Portilla

Is this what you mean, Frederick? Alexander sat in the dark study waiting for dawn with the remains of his father.

Strong bronze man pauses, looks on Palenque, Temples, sacbeob, roof combs. Thinks: beauty. Eyes fold Mongolian on

inside near sloped forehead. Man plays with leather on sandal of deerskin. Beauty is here, so why to the jungle? Great Gods are here in Holy Palenque. But we have let shaman talk to Great Gods alone. Only the shaman knows all the life secrets. Laws and secrets, shaman and Gods, pulling on hair and at neck and at shoulder. Only the jungle, only the forest, is left for bronze men with their heads full of Gods. Stepping in green with his back to the Temples, bronze man feels lump, ball of tears in his throat. What is there left for a man who must stand with one sandal in jungle, one sandal on stone?

Alexander remembered. Sit quietly and let the beast reveal itself, have patience, the man used to say. You crouched quiet, father. You understood them.

People bustling. Alexander stumbled into the hallway. The window on the front door was frosted, the hallway felt icy. Alexander wended his way into the kitchen. Arnett was bundled in his brown coat, maneuvering a small pot over the burner on the stove.

"Morning," Alexander said, rubbing his neck, which was aching intensely.

The old man grunted. "Sure in hell is. And a bloody cold one! Look at it out there! Yer gonna hafta tell me how to jack the heat up in this place. Bloody near froze my jewels

off! Like they used to say, let the corporals take care of themselves, but watch out for yer privates..." He was staring into the thick greyish mixture. "Thought I'd make you and the missus some breakfast." He lifted the spoon, the stringy substance plopped back into the pot. "Never could understand how people could eat this crap," he mumbled. He glanced at Alexander. "It's s'posed to stick to yer innards."

Alexander smiled. "And everything else, from the look of it."

Arnett pointed the gummy spoon at Alexander's stomach. "Listen, sonny, at least it'll fill out all yer empty spaces." He grinned as Alexander grimaced, and turned back to the pot.

Alexander climbed the stairs to get to Marsha. She was busily sorting out clothing on the bed, the baby and the giraffe surrounded. She hadn't come with much, but there were her own clothes and now the baby's outfits she'd made. She packed silently, smiling at Alexander as he picked up the little leggings.

"So he got the long johns, eh?"

The coat was tiny too, and the sweater...

"Alex, would you, I just folded those things!"

He put them back. "Sorry." The baby was wide awake, not doing anything at all, just watching them. "And how are you?"

Alexander lightly jiggled the baby's stomach. "You like the giraffe?

He's nearly as big as you are right now." He held the giraffe close to the baby's face. "Uh, Marsha..."

She looked up.

"There will be people coming by this afternoon. My brother Harry and my sister Alfie."

"Oh?"

"Yes...please don't volunteer any information about Frederick. I'll deal with them, okay?"

"Who will they think I am?"

"I don't know. Marshmallow, maybe."

Horace and Alfreda arrived together and were ushered into the house by an old man who a few moments previously had made desperate and futile attempts at becoming presentable. His white hair seemed to be standing at attention. Alfreda had obviously been warned that Arnett would be there because she looked at him with a kind of leprous respect as she swished her penumbrous self past him, uttering something about "not the brightest of souls." Horace stood in front of Arnett and awkwardly offered his hand. Arnett took it and just as awkwardly coughed, "Charmed."

Oh no you don't, Alfie. Alexander took Alfreda by the arm and hospitably forced her over to Arnett. "This is Arnett, Alfie, a friend and a gentleman. Arnett," he said grandly, "this is my

sister Alfreda, an especially nice nun."

Alfreda blushed at this reference but briefly took Arnett's hand.

Alexander arranged the teacups around the table; Arnett sat in the armchair in the corner of the room.

"Alexander," Alfreda motioned with her head toward Arnett and lowered her voice, "does he have to be here?"

Alexander looked over at Arnett who seemed to be studying his fingerprints on the side of the chair's wood trim. "Yes, Alfie, he does." Alexander poured the tea. "So how are you, anyway?"

Alfreda looked at Horace. "We are fine," she answered for both, as she had always done. "Alex, what's this about you leaving? Have you finished the revisions to the journals already?"

The Mayan Jester God still looming, taunting Alexander. He stared at it, then faced Alfreda. "Okay, we might as well get right to it. Yes, I am going away. A friend of mine dropped by and I'm going away with this friend for a few days, maybe a week. I'll be coming back here again before I leave for Edmonton. Uhm...in my absence I've asked Arnett, here, to house-sit."

Alfreda broke in. "I don't know, Alex. With all respect to your friend, we hardly know him, and..."

"You hardly know me."

"It's true, Alex, things could come up," Horace added.

Alexander answered firmly. "Arnett could handle it. Neither of you wants to take care of this place, and he can handle it. I'll be back shortly."

"What about father's work?"

"Okay kiddies. Seems the man was better organized than we'd given him credit for. He'd incorporated the meat from the journals into the lecture notes which, from what I can see, are fine as they are. The journals, therefore, are pretty irrelevant."

Horace was watching him closely. "Wait a minute, Alex. You know that father's journals have always been some of his most interesting work. I can't imagine there's nothing worthy in them. You know the university will be willing to publish them."

"I said they're useless, Harry! Look, father was under a strain from the workload, okay? He wasn't getting any younger, remember. He just didn't devote the same kind of time to the journals as he had in the past."

"Well, Alex, I'd be willing to go through them once, in case there's a public interest side to this that you missed..."

"No! Please Harry, I know what I'm doing. Besides, I think father would have wanted me to take care of them."

Alfreda eyed him curiously, the way she had the other time she had come to the house. "He's right, Horace," she said slowly, "father would have wanted Alexander to finish with his work."

All eyes turned toward the door as Marsha entered with the child. Marsha was wearing a bright, multi-coloured jumper woven in coarse cotton. It looked Mexican. Her grey eyes scanned the people and she smiled and nodded at them. Alfreda and Horace did the same in surprised return.

"Hello," she said, "how do you do?"

Alexander remembered. Marsha did have a way of jumping into a situation with a familiar 'hello.' He hastened over and stood beside her.

"Alfie, Harry, this is my friend, Marsha. Marsha, my sister, my brother. Marsha was passing through Montreal when she heard the news and...well, she decided to visit. I'll be taking her down to her family's place. I'm sort of friends of theirs."

Horace, obviously intrigued by the pale, wispy woman with the greetings and the baby, stood up and shook her hand, the movement awkward until Alexander relieved Marsha of the child.

"Come here you," he said gently, holding and bouncing the infant in his arms.

Alfreda's eyes opened wide and she adjusted her seat to watch the scene. She held out a hand to Marsha, who took it carefully, as if the black outline were a sign of fragility.

"Where do you know my brother from?" the nun asked, polite but curious.

Alexander shot Marsha a warning glance.

"Well, I used to be in archaeology too...that's how I know Alex."

Alfreda nodded. "I see, you must have known my father as well. So you went to university here?"

"Well, I moved around a lot."

"I suppose you can't so readily now, what with your little one."

"Would you like to hold him?" Marsha motioned for Alexander to bring the baby over.

"Oh no, I'm afraid I can't..."

"Sure you can, Alfie," Alexander smiled and placed the child in her arms.

"What's his name?" Alfreda asked, clumsily juggling the child, a spontaneous smile spreading on her lips.

Marsha looked quickly from Alexander to Arnett. "His name is Arnett," she said, "Arnett, here, is the great-grandfather."

"You're her grandfather?" Alfreda inquired of Arnett, tilting her head toward Marsha.

Arnett grunted. "Ya well, we're all kinda related back there somewhere, I expect."

The fact that the old man was somehow related to the young polite girl seemed to alleviate Alfreda's apprehensions. Marsha distracted Alfreda with talk of babies' habits, nuns' habits,

the weather in Montreal. Arnett spindled in the armchair, the doily framing his tufts of hair. He picked at the crumbs on the front of his vest, reconstructing the cookie that had disintegrated on its way to his mouth.

Horace sat close to Alexander on the couch. He lowered his voice. "Alex...did you find out anything about the markings on father's body?"

Alexander could see his father picking up bones and struggling to comprehend the dried strands of flesh still clinging. "Ya...uh, father...father was beginning to study primitive medicine...in the line of inoculations against tropical diseases... he was curious about the ancient 'cure-all' practices. He had a theory...and he occasionally tried things out on himself, that's all."

"But they're wounds!"

"He occasionally, unsuccessfully, tried things out on himself."

Please Harry, leave it. You don't know archaeology, you're just being methodical again...Harry, leave it alone.

"I want to see the papers, Alex." Horace's voice was firm.

"You see, I talked to Simmons myself the other day."

Alexander bristled. "He mentioned it. And?"

"Well, he began in much the same way you did. Said father had been tired. Said the work was suffering. But then, when I pushed him, he admitted that it might be good for me to see

them."

Alexander realized now the question that had always bothered him about Harry. How could such a gentleman, such an understanding, polite man be a good salesman? 'But then I pushed him' - polite little nudges, Harry, gentlemanly grovelling? There were contradictions at work in Harry, he'd always known that.

"Ed said that?" he answered. Oh Simmons, why did you carry it so long, for this?

"Yes, when I told him the field journals had arrived at the house he got pretty agitated, as though he were angry or something. He said the journals were pretty useless, but I told him I wanted to see some of the work, told him you were editing the stuff. I was quite firm with him, Alex, and he suggested I go through the lecture notes, since they'd be made more public than the journals. I really think he respected my position, Alex. And...well, he...uh, said he didn't really trust you to do justice to the lecture notes, so he suggested I have them; I really must insist, Alex. Don't take it badly..."

Alexander nodded, suppressing a smile. Simmons knew the lecture notes would probably be okay. "The lecture notes... he said you should see them, that I wasn't worthy to edit them..."

"Well, I don't think he meant it in quite that way, Alex.

I think he just thought two heads would be better than one."

Alexander paused at this reference. Two heads have gone over it already. "Okay, alright Harry, I'll give them to you. You can check them yourself. The lecture notes," he emphasized. Ed Simmons, waving with only his streamers, somehow looking complete in the process. Alexander nodded. And all for the sake of the future.

He sits in the lecture hall with about twenty-five other people, all heads turned in the direction of the blackboard. The man at the front of the class is tall, thin, with a bald head that becomes progressively shinier under the classroom lighting. The man is wearing a woven wool shirt of royal blue and his throat is improbably adorned with a paisley ascot. The effect is one of studied casualness and it doesn't quite work. The man looks far more comfortable in plaid shirts and work pants, although the other students in the class do not know this. Perhaps for them this formal casualness comes across as natural, but from the fifth row, corner, the verdict is decidedly: stiff.

There is a slender leg next to his, he is noting how the whole body of the woman leans forward in rapt attention, scribbling notes and nodding in agreement with the man as he mentions some point.

Once or twice the man at the front looks over at him. In

the middle of a sentence, in the middle of a word the man suddenly shoots him a glance. The face looks animated when it does this, hopeful even. He hates to see this look on the man's face; it is the look that demands things, gives things, expects things. He shifts awkwardly and in doing so touches the leg of the girl next to him. She shifts and grins to herself. They will be going for coffee again after class, he hopes.

A gathering of books, overhead projector cord wrapped in a figure-eight on the side of the trolley. He is carrying his knapsack on his shoulder, her library books under his arm. With his other arm he is guiding her among the rows of chairs, clearing the path of empty coffee cups and stale butts of cigarettes. They are nearing the door when he hears the voice.

"Mr. Aurelie, may I have a word with you for a moment?"

The girl looks over at her professor, but he does not. Finally he turns.

"Uh...I'm a little busy right now, sir."

The man takes off his glasses and wipes them, seems embarrassed at the presence of the third party.

"Please, Alexander, I was wondering if you could help me."

He bites his lip and drops the girl's hand. "Yes. what is it, sir?"

"I was wondering if we might walk over to the bookstore

together. There are some reference texts I'm thinking of putting on the reading list and I was hoping you could give me your student's opinion of them."

He pauses. "Can Valerie come along?"

The man shrugs shyly. "Why, of course, if you, if she... if you wanted to."

He walks beside his father across the leaf-strewn campus, his arm at the girl's elbow. She is listening to his father explain the rigors of next term's workload. He is listening too, listening to the man lose all shyness and awkwardness as he describes the content of the course work. Has the girl just laughed at something the man has said? This lightness of mood is puzzling. The man, it would seem, needs his framework, his props. He scratches his head with the girl's books.

They near the bookstore and he turns to the girl, nods in the direction of his father. Something makes him pick up on the banter and he surprises himself and says, "And you should see the tricks he's taught his graduate students!"

The glasses are removed and shaken at him in mock disapproval, and the girl smiles from father to son.

Alfreda was explaining to Marsha the dim details and straggly branches of the Aurelie family tree, Marsha smiling politely and nodding on cue, her grin flashing over to Alexander periodically.

"So...like the ceiba," Alexander interjected dramatically.

"And Alexander, of course, is the writer in the family,"

Alfreda gushed.

Marsha looked at Alexander with round eyes.

"Oh...yes?"

"Of course, you know all that...his last book was based on the story of a woman our family knew years and years ago, Laurelie Leclerc. She lived all by herself in the backwoods of northern Quebec. Let me just go and get a copy...Alex, where did father keep his copies? They must be in his study, let me just..."

"Alfie!"

She whirled around. "Alex?"

"Let me get the damned thing, okay?"

Alfreda turned to Marsha. "Nonsense, I'll get it. He's always so embarrassed..."

Alexander glared at Alfreda and followed her out of the room. In the study, his tote bag on the chair.

"I see you're all ready to go," she commented dryly.

"Get away from there!"

"Alex!" she looked indignant. "Please don't take that tone with me again." She pulled open a couple of drawers and retrieved the volume. "Just because you take no pride in your accomplishments doesn't mean we all have to skulk about dismally."

And he is wandering around the house, which still smells of his mother's perfume, her flower-gardening gloves on the sill

by the kitchen door. They are all home except mother; Alfie, Harry, his father. Nobody is talking to anybody. They are all dressed up like Sunday and it isn't even Sunday. His father has put on a huge pot of coffee and soon this scent fills the room, snuffs out the perfumed trace of his mother. Father will begin some work in his study now, the coffee will keep him awake.

"Can I have some coffee, please?" He wants to remain awake too. Forever and ever he wants to stay awake and not fall asleep like his mother who now has to sleep forever and ever. He climbs on the stool and takes down two coffee mugs.

"Here they are," he places them on the sideboard for his father to fill. His father fills only one and moves slowly down the hallway in his dark blue suit and disappears into the study.

Horace has gone to his room to read. As he passes by he sees that Horace is not reading, but staring straight ahead. And Alfie? The boy pushes open the door and sees his sister kneeling by her bed, sniffing and praying.

He doesn't know if he should, he does, steps into the room. His long pants still scratch and itch his legs and he notices that Alfreda has stepped out of her dark brown dress. It is in a heap on the floor. She is wearing only her slip now, her young breasts jiggling as she cries. She has on her cross and chain,

it jiggles too when she cries very hard.

He approaches her, kneels down beside her and tries to concentrate on God. She looks over and he is not sure if she sees him, her face is so contorted and streaming.

"Where's mummy gone to?" he asks gently, holding on to the other end of her rosary.

Her face stretches at the mouth; she is drooling.

"To God," the words dribble out.

He doesn't like to see Alfie so red and ugly. "Where is that, anyway?" Alfreda likes to talk about God. Her slip is flattened against her stomach so that he can see the indentation where her belly-button is. She heaves and wails.

"I don't know," she turns to him. "I don't know," throwing her arms against his shoulder and crying into his hair. His face is pressed against her chest, he can't breathe.

"Alfie..." he cries, pushing her away.

"Isn't it good then, if mummy's with God?"

Nothing he says seems to make any difference. She begins to cry again, more softly now, and he lets her hold onto him for a little while.

Alfreda returned to the living room, Alexander trailing behind the black material. "Here it is," Alfreda displayed the book to Marsha. Marsha continued to stare at Alexander.

"Alex," Horace was saying, "you won't forget to give me

the lecture notes."

Harry. Trying to help.

"I won't forget, Harry."

"Oh, look Alex, father wrote something in the back of your book."

"Give it to me please," Alexander grabbed.

Alfreda pulled it away. "It's a poem, Alex. I didn't know father liked poetry. Look, he copied a poem out...a poem by, here...let's see...Gwendolyn MacEwen. It's from a book called The Shadow-Makers, and it's called the "First Song from the Fifth Earth", whatever that means."

"Let me see!" Alexander demanded, but Horace held him back with his voice.

"Let her read it, Alex."

Somehow, the thought of the penumbra reading from The Shadow-Makers seemed appropriate, Alexander thought suddenly. Somehow, Alfreda was the one to do it. She held the book in both hands and spoke in the hushed room:

"By saying 'Love' you let loose all the angels and demons that were asleep within the bowels of mankind. 'Love' is not, as you think, a simple, tranquil word. Within it lie armies being massacred, burning cities and much blood. Rivers of blood, rivers of tears: the face of the earth has changed."

- Nikos Kazantzakis
The Last Temptation of Christ

I say all worlds, all times, all loves are one
 for we were there at the gathering of the waters
 when our unborn hours gathered wave on wave
 and our ages rose as seven sea-horses
 far as our far-sight saw.

(cruel rumour of time divide us
 world from world, and I am told
 it is the fifth earth where now
 we stand. But look, I want

to walk in circles like the sun -
 don't ask why, take my hand!)

Of certain days and certain years
 we will remember not a thing; time is
 the ringing foam beneath the horses' hooves, and
 our several lives are lost in their dark manes.

(but it is of this earth only
 that I begin to sing
 and another thing I cannot do
 and another song I cannot bring together,
 for I said we were there
 at the gathering of the waters)

All earths, all ages, and all loves are one,
 but you say these maps are different,
 this landscape has been changed,

(angel, look again -
 it is only that the seas are blood,
 this continent the torso of
 a tougher god than we can name)

Quickly, take my hand!
 (otherwise, it is all the same)

Alexander was looking at the book in Alfreda's hands, concentrating
 on the place from where the words emanated. He saw his father's
 hand pressed up against the translucent film and for an instant,

for one brief instant, fingerprints appeared.

Alfreda looked at her brothers, embarrassed and confused.

"What does it mean?" she put her hand to her mouth, eyes filling with tears. "I don't know what it means..."

Alexander approached her.

"Oh, God," she cried, "oh, father."

Alexander held the stiff robes and felt his sister underneath. Alfreda cried into his chest as he rocked her slowly. Alfreda needed things explained, she needed to know what things meant. Alexander hugged her gently when he realized how fragile her penumbra really was.

And he and his brother pull the heavy sofa out and scramble behind it. Horace is dragging the box of Christmas wrappings with him.

"Don't anybody come in the living room, we're wrapping!" Horace threatens loudly; grins at the boy. "You bring your stuff?"

The boy nods, shaking a small bag that contains the presents for his mother, father, brother and sister. "But you can't look when I do yours," he says.

"Of course not, stupid. We'll make a deal. Now, what you get mummy?"

The boy shuffles inside the bag and pulls out a sea shell with brown and pink lines on an ivory background.

"What's it for?" Horace asks, cutting an appropriately sized paper.

"It's pretty," he says.

"Guess what Alfie's getting," Horace smirks. He digs his hand in the box and it emerges with the sponge dog.

"Again?" the boy asks.

"She got it on her birthday, but she gave it back to me on mine, so she's getting it again."

"Alfie doesn't like it."

"I know," Horace laughs and puts the dog in a big box. "She'll never guess it's in here."

"She'll cry."

Horace covers the box in green paper, ties a gold ribbon around it. "There," he says, pleased. He has hidden the horrible smelly dog yet another time.

"You go away now," the boy orders. "Hafta wrap yours."

Morning, they are all gathered around the tree. Father in his smoking jacket, mother with a Christmas apron over her blue shiny dress. Horace in a red sweater-present that Aunt Lucy made him open before Christmas. Alfreda sniffing with her Christmas cold. And he is in his short flannel pants with grey socks up to his knees. Only his thighs are cold, he goes over to the fireplace to warm them.

"Sandor, come over here. Don't you want to finish opening

"Your presents?" His father with his long pants on, isn't cold.

"I got one left?" the boy calls, running over.

His mother nods. "Yes, seems to be, dear. This one here is for you, from Horace."

Horace looking at him. Why is he looking so gawky-eyed? The parcel is handed to the boy as his brother watches carefully.

"Thank you," the boy pulls on the gold ribbon, tugs at the paper, the large box is opened. "The sponge dog," the boy says in surprise. "Mummy, look!"

Horace glaring at the boy, Alfreda has stopped sniffing, looks at the brown sponge dog with horror and relief.

"I like it, Harry," the boy says. "Thank you."

Alfreda dried her eyes upstairs. Then they were leaving. Alexander handed the bundle of lecture notes to Horace.

"You read them carefully now, Harry."

"I will, Alex, thanks." There was an awkward pause as Horace took the papers, a jumbling, as though Harry was as unfamiliar with his father's work as Alexander had been holding the baby the first time.

Alexander helped Alfreda on with her coat, and as she pushed her arms through the sleeves, he took hold of a multicoloured kleenexed hand. "You know," he said, "when I was talking to Simmons, he told me that before the crash father spoke of you,

and you, Harry. He loved you both."

Horace put a hand on Alexander's shoulder. "And you too, Alex," he added.

Alfreda's voice grasped him. "Alex, you can't leave as soon as you get back. I mean, you will be spending Christmas...why can't you stay...it's so close, and so soon after father...don't you think...I think he would have wanted us to be together."

Alfie of pigtails and penumbra. The cold, wet melton cloth in front of him on the toboggan centipede. Who demanded, as a child, because to all her whys.

"I don't know," he heard himself say. Christmas. Christmas with the Aurelies. A novelty, to be sure. Harry would undoubtedly have Michael and Stephen sing stereo Christmas carols in his ears, and Sandra would insist on buying him a shirt you needed cufflinks for. Alfie would drag them all to church, and they would all stand around Harry's silly Franklin stove and toast the Season.

"Alex," she pleaded, "it would be nice to be together."

Christmas Eve. December 24. Alexander remembered the journal references: On December 24, 2011, the Fifth Earth will be destroyed. Right in the middle of eggnog some Christmas Eve - perhaps, but not this one.

"Alright, Alfie," he said at last. "Arnett and I will be pleased to attend. Our parents would have wanted it this way."

He hugged Alfreda again and shook hands with Horace, holding Horace's arm with his other hand. He wanted desperately to see Alfreda's pigtailed again, just once, Harry's scrawny Adam's apple bobbing as they laughed together. But there were these two people standing here at this olive-trimmed wooden door to be accounted for. They smiled at him at the perimeter of the old house, then Alfreda opened the door and they stepped out, silhouetted, into the shimmering snow around the porch light.

Marsha sat on the edge of the sofa with the child on her lap. She had found an old Christmas album, turned on the cabinet stereo and was now listening to the crackling music. "If we can't have a crackling fire," she said. She sang softly to the baby, tapping her finger on his fist:

Later on we'll conspire, as we dream by the fire,
To face, unafraid, the plans that we're made,
Walking in a winter wonderland...

He sat beside them and put an arm around Marsha's shoulder until she sat back comfortably in the crook of his arm. "The kid's first Christmas," he said, and she smiled. "Not like the old kid over there," he nodded fondly at Arnett. "Looks like he's already been up waiting for Santa."

Marsha smiled again. Her ponytail was relinquishing its customary straggly strands, she looked no older than a child herself. She was gently touching his neck, no, moving the collar

of his shirt. "Alex," she said, alarmed, "Alex...what's this mark here on your neck...it looks so...so much like..."

Alexander winced as she touched it. He had felt it for some time now. "What does it look like?"

Marsha stared at his neck than looked away suddenly. "Like a bruise," she whispered.

Alexander nodded slowly. It didn't matter. That didn't matter, anyway. "Marsha, what do you want for Christmas?"

"What...is your neck okay, anyway?"

"Yes. Now, what do you think of satin...I mean, do you like satin dresses?"

The swirling lady waltzed through his head, past his eyes where he was sure Marsha must have seen her.

"What do you mean, for me?"

"Hmmm," he nodded.

She shrugged, laughing, and motioned with her hand to her rough cotton jumper. "I don't think it's for me, frankly.

On the digs it screams of overdressing, and is definitely inconvenient." She grinned. "And now, with this lurch into motherhood, well...I'd just as soon the little guy christens cotton as satin."

She was looking at him, at the sad smile on his face. She added quickly, "My mother had some really nice ones, the old '30-ish

evening gowns, you know, very fancy, but I could never get into them. She was even smaller than I am...especially lately," patting her disappearing stomach. "You know," she said quietly, "I always found them very pretty, Alexander. I never did understand how women could move in them, but they were beautiful, weren't they?"

He nodded, taking deep breaths. "Thanks for backing me up with Harry and Alfie, Marsha."

She shrugged. "I have had some practice dealing with the Aurelie family, you know. And what about you, you did alright there yourself."

He smiled. "For a snake climber."

"Charmer," she added.

They sat in the living room that was full of people, listening to Christmas carols and the snoring of an old man.

Alexander stood beside Arnett. "You going to be alright? I mean, you're not going to do something stupid like try to clean out the fireplace by yourself, or eat that porridge or anything."

The old man frowned. "You listen here. I was doin' fine before you were even thought of. This is my régime, I'm tellin' ye..."

"Okay, okay. And when I get back we'll get the house ready for Christmas, right?"

"It's here, the taxi's here!" Marsha called from the hallway,

bundling the baby in a wool outfit. "Oh here...I didn't mean to bring this down..." she threw the coverlet on the sofa. "Well, Arnett, goodbye for now. Thank you for all your help. As soon as I get settled, I'll send you my address."

Arnett mumbled something about not knowing why the missus had to leave anyway, but nodded. "You take care of young Arnett, here."

"I will, old Arnett. Oh, I almost forgot. I made you a present...just a second." She placed the baby on the couch beside him and ran into the hallway.

"Here," she said, out of breath. "It's a pair of wool socks. I noticed you weren't wearing boots, thought your feet might get cold."

She hugged Arnett, kissed his cheek.

"I never had cold feet in my life, honey, but thank ye."

She was looking at Alexander. "For you," she threw something at him and raced for the door with the diaper bag and the baby, the giraffe balancing in the confusion in her arms.

He unfolded the small piece of knitting. "What's this?" he asked, as he carried the other bags to the cold of the open door.

"Medal of Valor," she yelled over her shoulder. "You know, courage, Cowardly Lion."

"Hell, I got one of those from the war! Ye coulda had mine if ye'd wanted it!" the old man cackled from the living room.

The driver was helping Marsha into the back seat.

Alexander carried her suitcase and his tote bag. Marsha's bag was heavy, his own strangely heavy too. Only as much as I can carry, father. Only as much as I have room for.

Arnett stood at the front door, the coverlet wrapped around him. "You be back before Christmas," he sputtered warningly, then grunted, "we got a shitload of things to do, kid."

Alexander sat in the taxi looking at Arnett on the steps. He was waving with the socks Marsha had made him, he was bundled in the quilt. He had made himself at home. As the car backed out of the driveway, Arnett motioned with his hand and said something.

Alexander put his hand to his ear and rolled down the window quickly. "Eh?" he shouted.

The old man pointed to the border of the quilt. "The faery-beam upon ye," he growled.

The car turned onto the road, the meter began ticking. Marsha smiled at Alexander and held the baby up to the window, pointing to the snowman someone had made. Alexander pushes Alan and shrieks, hollers as Alan yanks his jacket and they go tumbling, tumbling down the hill of diamond shards. The snowman was in the yard with the stone lions that squatted at the

edge of the driveway. The lions, too, were tinged with snow,
but they never flinched.

"Ain't it the truth," Alexander nodded.

-end-